Indian Literature

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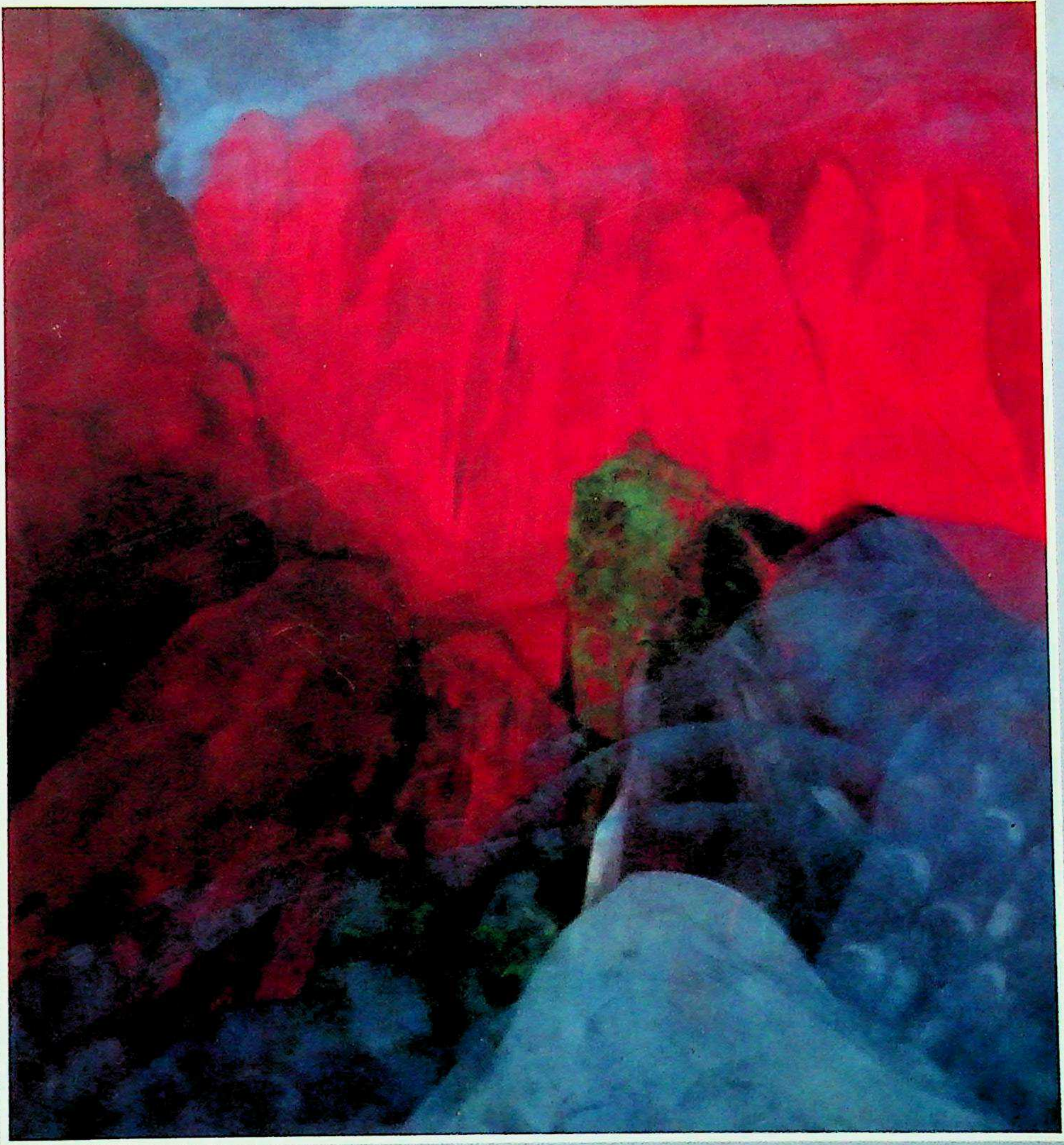

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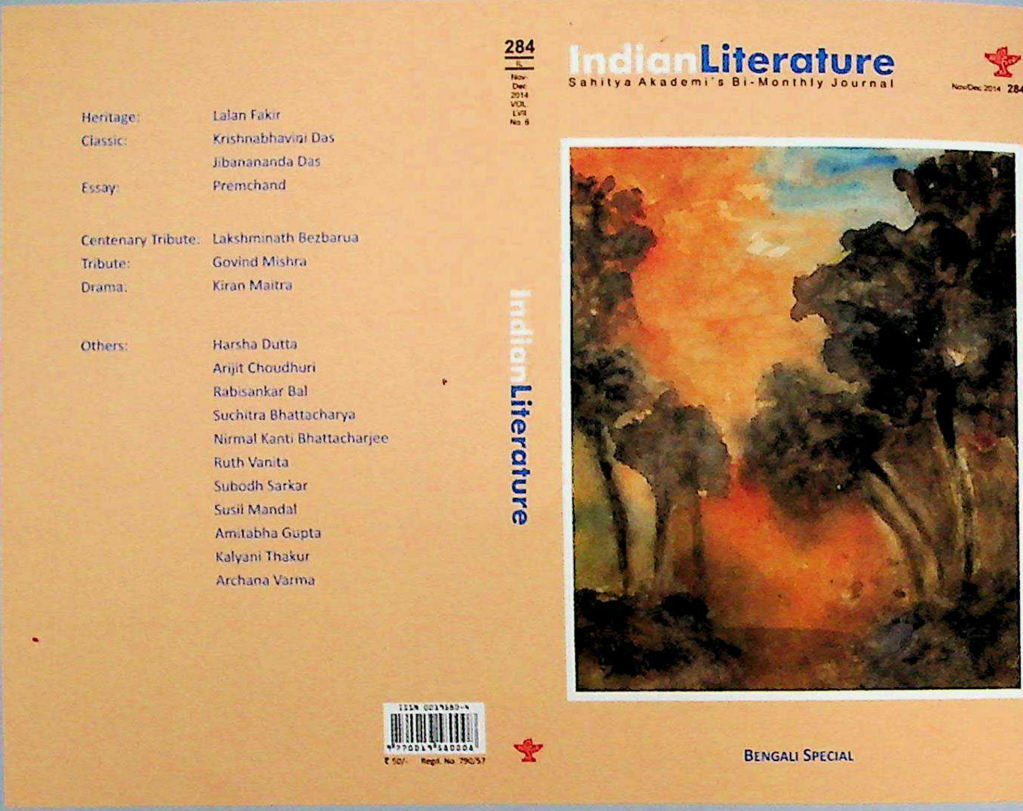

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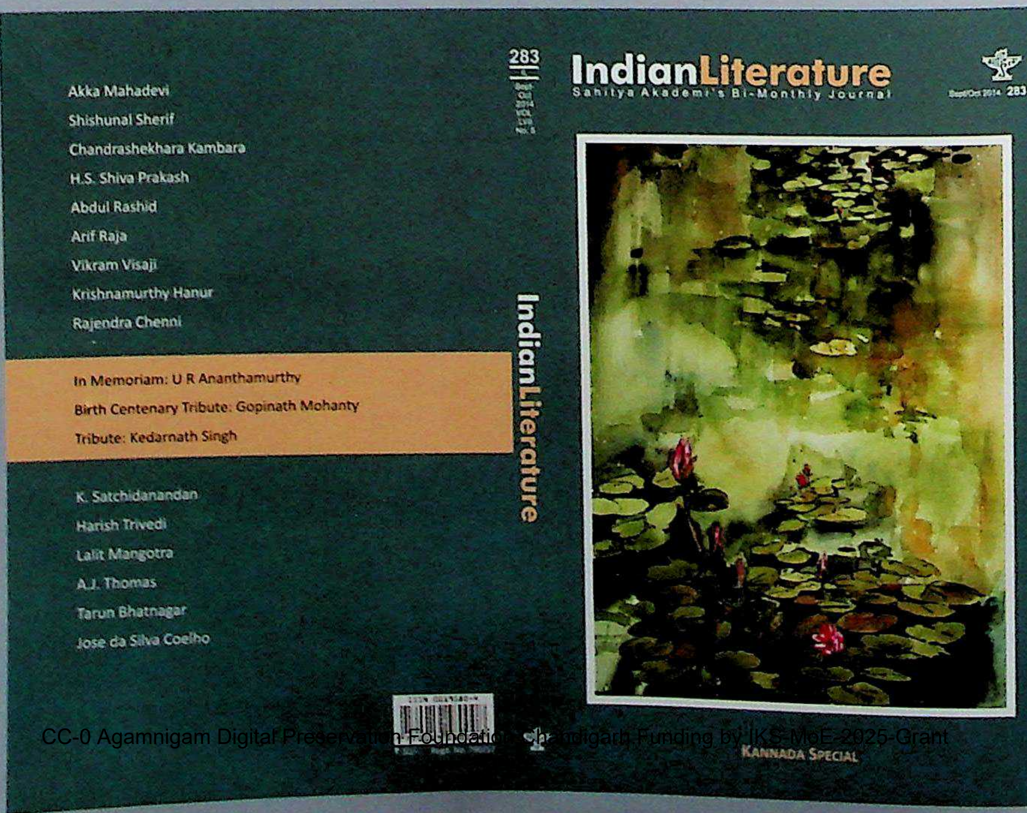

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KANNADA SPECIAL

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Our first issue of the year also coincides with the annual Festival of Letters of Sahitya Akademi. Keeping in view the original mission of the journal, last year articles from nearly all the Bhasha literatures were published within this single volume of two hundred pages. However, ordinarily we try to come as close to the ideal as possible, by making our selections from a wide number of Bhashas, and keeping the range of genres as varied as possible.

The most rewarding part of editing a journal of this kind is the elements of newness and unpredictability of the literatures you deal with. While reading a piece of fiction one may be caught unawares by the outlandish customs followed by a people living in your neighbourhood. A poem may open up a landscape that you didn't know existed in your own land. And this can be true for any Indian reader confronting writings from different parts of his country in these pages.

To begin with the poetry section, one may take Sitanshu Yashaschandra's *Vishvaamitri*, the supposed river-daughter of the famous sage, now "dragging along some nameless liquid/finds a narrow passage/between the beasts locked up for life in the big zoo", in a crowded city of Gujarat. Shanta Acharya's 'Painter of Gods' sings about the rituals that are part of the creative process of *patta-chitra* paintings in Odisha. Ranjani Neriya's poems unfold before us a quaint world of flora and fauna. Jayanta Krishna Sarmah's poems from Nepal are moving portraits of a lost world, replete with scenes of childhood with indigenous games and nursery rhymes. Then we have some recent poems of Sitakant Mahapatra, the Odia poet known for his extraordinary play of words with ideas. Another bright star of this issue is Gulzar whose poems with their surrealistic beauty have never ceased to baffle his readers.

As 'Heritage' we have a rare gem Kshetrayya, the 17th century Telugu poet, with a bunch of his extraordinary *padams* translated along with a brief introduction by S. Suresh.

The short stories are again from five different languages. And each of them has factors quite illuminating in their cultural subtexts and nuances. Vaasanthi's Tamil story about the life of a female performing artist who can never hope to get a place in respectable society in spite of her talent and success, is a poignant comment on the double standards of patriarchal traditions. Himanshi Shelat's is another moving portrayal of the compartmentalized worlds inhabited by women in a male dominated society.

Apart from these, the oral literature from Manipur comes with a fairy-tale topography where the tale would take the main stream Indian reader by surprise when a young married girl, brought to the court for possessing magical powers, is spurned by her husband for the same reason but the King himself proposes to her and makes her the queen.

Kamal Padhye's autobiography had caused a furor in the Marathi literary world for its honesty and sheer disregard for hypocritical decencies, and we have an excerpt of it. The Nepali novel excerpt is no less an achievement for us, as it is a moving saga of a certain marginalized people whose existence is hardly noticed by the main stream society.

This issue presents eleven Indian languages in several genres, each article with an emphatic presence. The two essays are remarkable for their areas of discourse which are little explored in Indian academics: Sumanyu Satpathy's study on Nonsense literature and K.W.Christopher's on early Christian literature in Telugu.

The usual rounding off of the contents is with the review section offering incisive comments on some of the latest books in the market, by some of our most able reviewers and scholars.

For the cover we take again a striking painting of a young artist established and well acknowledged in her field.

Yashodhara Mishra
Guest Editor

Kshetrayya: Introduction

S. Suresh

As with lot of historical figures in India, not everything about Kshetrayya is known with absolute certainty. He is supposed to have lived in the 17th Century (1600 to 1680 CE). His original name is supposed to be Varadayya and he was born in a village called 'Muvva,' close to Kuchipudi village in Andhra Pradesh.

Legend has it that Varadayya was smitten by a young Devadasi called Mohanangi and was heart broken when she spurned him. Mohanangi challenged him to compose lyrics on the presiding deity of the village. A saintly person in the temple courtyard initiated him into the Gopala chant. Later Varadayya started composing songs and danced to them. Mohanangi then became his disciple and started dancing to the tunes he composed. He undertook pilgrimage to various *kshetras* and hence he came to be known as *Kshetrayya*.

Kshetrayya's songs are known as *padams*. They depict the *sringara rasa*. Love in all its various forms became the subject of Kshetrayya's *padams*. There are both physical and spiritual longing in them. From the sheer animal passion to heightened sense of separation, Kshetrayya dealt with every form of love. His *padams* are sung in dance recitals and in Carnatic music recitals even today. We must note that stupendous effort has been put in by Veena Dhannammal's family (Dhanammal, Jayammal, Balasaraswati, Brinda, Mukta, Vishwa et al) in preserving the *padams* of Kshetrayya.

❑

Kshetrayya

1

I am seeing you after such a long time
Been four or five months since I saw you
Muvvagopala

You appeared real in my last night's dream
With a start I woke up, searching frantically for you
drenching my upper garment in tears, unable to find you.
I pine for you. Do you think of me at all?
You, who are the fruit of my penance

No betel nut, no food, no pleasure, no sleep
since you left me
I am like the one drenched in rain and
lost in a forest where darkness has set in

The thoughts of my parents,
Laughter of the young girls
Do you hear them?
Let me tell you this surprising fact
From the time of our union, you have become my world
and no thought possesses me
Muvvagopala

2

How did you come here?
How could your legs move away from such a loving Lord?
O young girl
Muvvagopla will be calling out your name

Shaking his head sadly
Getting up from his bed with a start
he would look all around
and his eyes would turn red, full of tears
O beautiful girl

He stands at the threshold of his house
your beautiful face in his dreams,
He curses his fate and hopes that the impossible happens
O beautiful girl

He remembers you a lot, your Muvvagopala,
Remembers every graceful move of yours
You gave him freedom to express his love and
he finds you beyond compare
O beautiful girl

3

Love: what sort of thing is this,
I know not my friend
Muvvagopala ridicules me
I can't bear this
What should I do my friend?

Unable to sleep, through day or night
My love for him doubles my friend
How can I control the rising passion?
I under the spell of this trickster called
Muvvagopala

I know not the art of love making
In my dream state and in wakefulness
I keep blabbering about him and
I don't feel like talking to my friends
I am unaccustomed to such intense passion
What should I do my friend?

4

What sort of person is he?
He doesn't go through this lane?
O damsel with curly hair
Muvvagopala is his name

He is the dark skinned one
He is a trickster
He speaks charming words
and mischievousness is his property
He knows the art of love

Gold laced upper garment he wears
and has now placed a bet
that however many be the women
he would make love and not be tired
A music lover, a munificent donor

He says he will entertain me
for he knows my ways of love
He was here the other day it seems
Muvvagopala is his name
He is young my dear and
he is handsome

5

I am a young girl and I am ignorant
Shyness overcomes me as all girls tell me
to go and lock myself in Kanchi Varada's embrace

They told me to go approach him
They told me to go kiss him
They told me to go fondle him

I have not read the treatise on love
I am the innocent one
And they want me to go and indulge him
In fun and frolic

On a bed on jasmine buds, with a calm mind
They want me to unite with him pleasing his heart

You with delicate lips, listen
All women want that my union happens with
Muvvagopala

6

O my dear, why did I fall in love
with Yadugiri Cheluvaraya
I never imagined the turn it has taken

He doesn't let me be at one place
He doesn't let me sleep
I have not had food and
honey tastes bitter

I can't bear anything which is cool
Jasmines have turned into thorns
This is uncontrollable passion
Long sighs escape often

All my thoughts are only on him
The doorstep has become my home
The one who met me many times
Muvvagopala is the same as Cheluvaraya

7

What shall I do?
How will my passion subside?
Who will bring that pearl teeth beauty
back to me?

I drew your lotus like face
but how can I draw the fragrance it emanates?
I drew your desirous lips
but how can I draw the honey they bear?

I could paint your lovely eyes
but how can I draw the mild alarm in them
I could draw your soft throat with all the veins
but how can I draw the melody that emanates from it?

O young girl, I drew our love making
as the coiling of two serpents
but I couldn't draw that feeling with which
you cried out, "Muvvagopala, come to me,
again"

8

How can I tell you?
How can I bear this?
What should I do my friend?

O lovely lady
About to leave town, with great affection he called me
and the loving words he spoke
How can I tell you?

Don't neglect your food
Don't pine in anguish
In multiple ways, for my own good
The words he uttered, with eyes full of tears
How can I tell you?

Shaking his head
And with tearful eyes
Said he would come back soon
Sighing at every step he took
With a passion filled mind
The words that my Lord spoke
How can I tell you?

What penance did I do?
What prayers did I offer?
What has fate in store for us?
A determined Muvvagopala told me

That we will come together in the game of love
Those words, how can I tell you?

9

Why do you ask me to go to him?
Why don't you go to him yourself, my friends?

O lady, I will not go there
He takes out betel leaf half chewed by him
and offers it to me
He pulls my hands and asks me
to enter the bedroom
If I say no, he says 'hmm'
I am scared

O fair eyed one
He presses my just sprouting breasts
till it aches
Brushing aside my protests
He leaves a mark of his sharp nails
And slinks away like a thief
When I scream

Muvvagopala made promises
and pulled me towards him
Asking me not to shout and
gagging me with all his strength
he did lots of things to me
I am scared

10

Look at her
Look at the way she moves
She is a woman, a housewife, a daughter-in-law,
She is going to the street where Gopala resides

A highly respected family
A palanquin to go anywhere
This cheap woman doesn't seem to respect her husband
Who can escape the fate that is theirs?

Not caring the least
When the upper garment slips off
This spitfire of a seductive woman is not bothered
By people laughing around her

Abusing the mother-in-law, father-in-law and brother-in-law
Bringing shame to the family
She goes to join Muvvagopala
Is she a woman or a log?

Translated from Telugu by S. Suresh

❑

Sitanshu Yashaschandra

Vishvaamitri[*], Behind the Bend

He dashed forth to offer friendship
to all;
a sage whom they called Vishvaamitra.
He didn't know much of a world busy in mutual manoeuvers.
It lost no time to dump upon him dirty heaps of disrespect.

– She is a listless daughter of some such sage:
this our river, Vishvaamitri.

She has no intimate wash-places, where women might come to bathe.
No public wharfs, where sailing ships could pause for a refill.
No quiet side-walks near her flow for an evening's stroll.
Pundits standing in water waist-deep uttering *shlokas* to the Sun
or Padres baptizing others in the name of the Son,
she has none.
No water at all, in fact, that could rightly be called water.

She flows on, mute, dragging along some nameless liquid.
Finds a narrow passage
between the beasts locked up for life in the big zoo
and the citizens of my town loitering lost for a while in the big garden.

Like a leper-woman she retreats with her limbs drawn into herself.

This river of ours cannot afford to have
shame, hope, pain or a faint smile on her lips.

---

[*] Vishvaamitri is a small river that runs through Vadodara in central Gujarat.

Whenever I have looked straight at her
she has, each time, lowered her gaze
and slid away behind that bend over there.

Though, if you thought of it,
she too might have once been a river.
Just as Ganga Seine Volga Nile Thames Hoang-ho Mississippi Amazon,
all are rivers,
she, too, was, perhaps, one.

Much smaller,
yet a river: water coursing along, in which water-creatures lived,
a full moon was reflected,
stags, with tangled horns, at dawn,
and at late evening, Cheetahs, with glistening bodies,
bent their heads, in respect,
and then took a drink;
on whose two banks, farmlands,
made thirsty by the strong summer sun,
suckled, crouching in a row, their lips trembling,
like lovely infants!

– Whenever I say such things,
standing on that bridge over there stretched across her,
softly, so that only she might hear,
she has, each time,
pretended not to hear me.

She would close her eyes shut, pull a sari around her thin body,
draw a cover of floating dirt across her face,
go away, in some haste, behind that bend.

Rarely, though, at last,
when things go beyond her endurance,
then,
on a monsoon night, in the dark,
she is in spate, this river,
she overflows like eyes of a blind girl.

Early pre-dawn, next,
she climbes over the banks, quickly,

rushes to the town square,
lifts herself up on the tips of her feet,
and rises up to the feet of her King, once so caring, now
dressed in Black Clothes, seated on a Black Horse,
turned to stone;

she,
stops, stares, understands, bites her tongue,
shuts her lips up, dries her tears
with the back of her hand, and, all by herself,
falls back, recedes, noiseless, stepping through all the mud, and goes away
behind that bend.

Translated from Gujarati by the Poet.

❑

Gulzar

Prayer Beads

The earth chants over a beaded loop
of nights and days, its rosary
year after year it circles the sun.
Three billion have passed.
The Lord slumbers still.
When the fire within cools
and is about to go out.
He will open eyes of crimson fire
and welcome the mendicant life
to the warmth of his embrace.

"Maala Ke Manko Ki Tarha...," *Pluto,* 2013

Whirlwind

The earth spins, a whirlwind,
Stop it!
Let me get off
and find my rightful place.
Every year it brings me to
that same old station: my birthdate
and it does not stop.
If Time spreads,
where does one find the shore?
If the space shrinks,
where is the core?

"Bawaner See Ghoomti Hai," *Pluto,* 2013

A Tiny Globe

Anywhere I seek to keep my stuff
in this tiny globe available to me
I find someone else staking a claim.
I'm afraid to unpack my belongings.
What if I find Him there too?
Wish there was a corner devoid of Him!
He has encroached upon
every bit of space available on this earth!

"Chhotta Sa Ik Globe Mila Hai...," *Pluto,* 2013

A Book of a Bygone Era

God is a book of eras past
wrapped in a sacred cloth
left to wait on a pedestal
for only the chosen to read.
Today, it has become so mundane
one finds it lying around
like an old magazine
in the waiting room of a clinic.

"Khuda Bade Qadeem Daur Ki Kitaab Hai," *Pluto,* 2013

Changing Course

Surely we could leave this path
for a new one, unlike it.
They say, He has our route mapped out
just like a contractor hiring workers at a building site
and calling them back at end of day.
Surely, there must be other maps
to choose from the universe.
A different master of our destinies,
surely, another god.

"Badal Ke Dekhen Tou Rasta...," *Pluto,* 2013

Translated from Urdu by Nirupama Dutt

Sitakant Mahapatra

The Poem Goes to Meet the Old Woman

The poem goes to meet
the old woman.

It goes because it can know
from the face of the old woman,
who sits sadly and alone
in the early evening.

Now the birds' nests are empty,
but in the future a lot of work
is lying scattered:
to arrange, the trophy which
Her grandson won in the football match,
and his book shelf, dust-deposited—
all have to be cleaned.

She has arranged two rooms already,
including the verandah of the small house;
now, the earthen-pot on the fireplace
the rice is boiling to the full.

Yesterday, she had brought potato,
tomato and carrot on the auto-rickshaw,
much more than what is needed by
a lonely person. She knows
the prices are shooting up.

Wearing the half-torn slippers, she
takes a walk in the courtyard,

Breathes in the evening breeze.
"See how the moon has arisen there;
the whole world is waiting for my work."
Saying this, she enters the room.

The poem cannot say anything;
it returns to its place.

"Kabita Budhiku Bhetibaku Jaai"

Coffin

Slowly you died
and stood before me.

It is not a *baula* tree, but a coffin;
the yellow and green flowers of the creepers
have opened on you earlier.
From somewhere the *koel* comes on,
Sits on your dead branch.
Perhaps it couldn't do anything.
In grief. It left without a word.

I want to forget everything:
the hand scooped a hole,
day after day your growing up
the cool breeze of the afternoon
on the bench under shadow.

The moonlight flowing down
through your leaves.
Your heaps of flowers
are like delicate designs.

Nothing can be forgotten.
The nose receives the strong smell
of the absent flowers.
We made you sleep quietly
in the meeting place of a variety of flowers.

"Sabadhara"

Rain

Rain:
The wire on which garments are dried,
it hangs small diamonds.

Among the Nagachampa leaves,
the nesting birds
do not come out of their nests.
From the seventh-floor of the building
the pigeons do not leave their peaceful, safe place.
If the wish is strong, they fly around
and return home.
No one sings the morning's prayer song.

Rain:
Throughout the night, in half-sleep,
in dreams, it makes me listen to
Kishori Amonkar's "Swetamalhar",
Ravi Shankar's music on the sitar.

Rain:
It makes me sit on the dampened
boat, pushes it into Chitrotpala's waters;
puts on the boat's deck only
two *kadamba* flowers...

"Barsha"

The Future

This world and its long history
is one that adjourns our various dreams,
our fears, happinesses, hopes.

That dream, that fear, that joy and the hopes,
is our simple contribution to the future.

And that future is not ungrateful,
it returns all our entire past,

all history is well-planned
according to its proposal.
The past stands in front of us,
turning into "now", with its head
bent down, like a guilty man.
See it completely flawless;
there is no stain, not broken down a bit.

He stands and we know
that it has come in time's flow,
to give another pause.
In its measureless pages.

"Bhabitabya"

A Word

Once a word came into my poem.
I don't know where that silent word
took its birth, how during
its journey it had put aside death.

Its alphabets opened their petals,
coloured themselves;
they smeared the colour of emptiness
and scented and perfumed themselves.

That word went far and wide
with the goddess's feet.
It became line after line,
narrated my tears, all my sadness,
my fear of death.
My greed for affection,
all my illusions, endless hard work,
all that tiredness.

However, it was quiet, without any noise.
Each of my musical strains, every punctuation
wanting for a place in the silence of its nest,
were listening to their absent echoes.

Yet how strange it knew the quiet and sacred hymn
of the conversation with the quiet stone.
It also knew how to make the flying birds
in the sky to sit near it.

It never talked about its own desire.
Its quietude astonished the entire world.
It could not make anyone understand,
and yet it never felt troubled.

"Sabdatie"

Translated from Odia by Bibhu Padhi *and* Minakshi Padhi.

❑

Shanta Acharya

The Scream

Walking down the hill in the mystic light of autumn
surrounded by nature's vast and ageless kingdom,
in thrall to the city's sprawl stretching to the skyline,
I heard a sound, a voice primeval, half-human,
a cry of compassion, a song of survival,
music of the universe, mirror reflecting the soul.
The sun was setting in an ocean of blood, the crimson
horizon heaving. Clouds, birds, trees, all nature
hummed in unison as a scream ran through creation–
an orgasmic gasp, a howl of inexplicable origin,
like silence before the beginning of consciousness.
Time's scroll of suffering unfurled in a chorus of pain
rising to a crescendo – centuries of prayers for justice.
Darkness descended, the scream sighed: *I am existence*.

Painter of Gods

I

It takes five days for the spirit of the gods
to descend, for the preparation of the canvas–

from soaking the tamarind seeds in water,
grinding it to a thick pulp in a mortar,

stirring the paste on a gentle fire
until left with a residue, the glue

to stick two layers of cloth, cotton or tussar,
before buffing it with the fine powder

of the soft clay stone from the mountains of Nilgiri–
that lends the piece its unique colour.

Once dried in the sun, it is cut and polished
with a semi-precious stone,

Then with a smooth pebble or wood.
I've followed this ritual since my childhood.

But first one must bathe and pray in the temple,
be pure of body, mind and soul.

The highest good is in lending our lives
to the mystery and majesty of God's purpose.

Imagine the universe before time and creation,
awaiting the imprint of the divine imagination,
a mind before it receives the world's impression.

What would it be like if we could live each moment
as a masterpiece in the throes of creation?

II

Father taught me all about colour–

conch shells for white, lamp soot for black,
yellow from the *hartala* stone, vermilion from cinnabar,

green a gift from the leaves of the neem tree,
blue from indigo and the *khandaneela* stone–

preparing me for such a sacred vocation.

We made paintbrushes with *keya* root–
the finer brushes with carved wooden handles
have mouse hair. A dozen long hairs at the centre
give it a needle-point edge when dipped in paint.
Tracing our ancestors back to the eighth century
when the painting of *patta-chitras** as souvenirs
for pilgrims turned into a profession,

and the craft was passed from generation to generation–
father's words and action left me hungry for perfection.
A work of art, he said, is true worship of the divine.

He wanted me to be the village's first female master-painter.
My parents wished for a son, which family doesn't?

When mother died giving birth to one,
he never took another woman, called me his treasure and son.

Now it is my turn to keep the tradition alive–
what difference does it make if I am a woman?

Wonder of the Age

He had seen emperors come and go–
some rising to giddy pinnacles of wealth and power
only to be imprisoned, murdered. Yet a true artist
he knew never lacked work.

A painter of saints, holy men and gods,
he knew all about creation.
Each time he painted a living thing
skilfully etching every bone, nerve, muscle and limb,
he could not breathe life into the image–
made him marvel at the miracle wrought
by the Supreme Artist – the universe
an expression of the divine imagination.

As a child he'd learnt how to chisel paintbrushes
from quills of birds, setting them with fine hairs
plucked from kittens and baby squirrels.
He sorted minerals, grain by grain–
carnelian, malachite, lapis-lazuli and emeralds,
according to their purity and brilliance.

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* *Patta-chitra* is a unique form of painting practiced in Orissa, India. *Patta* refers to the canvas and *chitra* means a painting or picture. The Puri *patta-chitras* were mostly devoted to the depiction of the trinity – Lord Jagannath with his brother Balabhadra and sister, Subhadra. Puri is considered among the four most sacred places in India. Today, *patta-chitras* include various deities of the Hindu pantheon.

Other pigments he made from insects, metals,
earth and animal matters, the world
his canvas and palette, a rainbow of colours–
for a cool yellow gold he added silver,
for a warmer hue he used copper,
learning to master the art of making gold glitter.
Early in life, he had the honour
of receiving the royal title, Wonder of the Age.

Sitting on a kalim, one arthritic knee flexed
to support his drawing board, he knew he'd arrived
at an awareness of being. *Is this how God feels*?
he wondered, his loneliness dissolving
at the transmuting touch of his paintbrush,
connecting him with everything.

Friendship

Like birdsong beginning inside an egg,
a flake of snow dreaming of an iceberg,

the rainbow sky beyond judgment,
a soul dwelling in two bodies.

Names safe in each other's mouths,
walking together, sometimes in the dark,

in silence more sympathetic than words–
something treasured, understood.

Not a duty, but a responsibility gladly undertaken,
a comfortable hand-in-glove feeling.

As the giving grows, the taking goes–
angels let us see the best of what we can be,
the shimmer of dawn prophesying
the appearance of a zillion stars at night.

Not following, not leading, just loving
for trying, not blindly, but closing one's eyes

in forgiveness, in prayer, finding the hard times
worth suffering, there being no better love than love

with no object, just being there, believing
willing to be trusted with everything.

Changing Itself

From mist and vapour
to earth and its creatures,
intergalactic water–
the incredible journey
starting before the beginning
of time, before the spirit moved
upon the face of the waters
making universes,
dividing water from water–

colourless, odourless,
lacking shape, taste,
complete yet miscible,
capable of being anything
creator-preserver-destroyer
finding its voice with others
holding infinite possibilities
in a landscape of illusions

revealing how life flows,
acquiring the essence of things
it touches, taking new identities
wanting to be changed, mended,
losing itself in everything it encounters,
transforming, keeping an open mind
an unstoppable force of nature
changing the world by changing itself

Shanta Acharya

Why Bad Things Happen

Bad things often happen to good people.
Good things also happen to bad people.

Good is not always done by good people,
It is sometimes done by bad people.

The world is full of good people
Doing bad things like the bad people.

So when good things are done by bad people,
They appear awfully similar to the good people.

It becomes difficult to tell the fundamental
Difference between the good and bad people.

When good and bad are equally culpable,
Indistinguishable almost, it is impossible.

To know what's what. Life's no longer simple.
We fail to identify good from evil–

This is not taking into account that people, in general,
Have a right to be treated as generally good, if not special.

Until proven otherwise. As most people are unpredictable,
It is our actions that speak, make us worthy of a medal.

Or get us locked up in some high-security jail.
As none of us is wholly good and truly capable.

Of knowing the other, one can only expect good people
To do the right thing, and not behave like the bad people.

Otherwise, it leaves most people in the middle
In a terrible muddle when sterling good people.

Failing to discern between good and evil, dissemble.
No wonder bad things happen to good people.

❑

Ranjani Neriya

Carambola, the Star of Fruit

Petal-bloom pleated like morning mist
nectar-borne to a ridged ellipsoid
cross-worked with stars,
ripe carambola, tart orangeade

The jam of it, the pickle of it,
monsoon-y plop-squash
intermittent on roof-tile, root-pile
on baked mud-paths of laterite

A knife-edge slipped from
tapered tip to stalk-head did it best
for twin boat-lengths, a seed sheath
in opaque jell, to sink your teeth in

The beauteous tent of jade
a tallness of deep-drugged childhood
that backyard tree, where
small dreams played huge

A hempen swing bringing down the sky,
the ratchet of carom startling
chipmunks into race, parrots
into wild green flight

Hard by the yearn of fired wood
cattle prance and the dovecote's
feathery siege, our collie circling a mile
in the cool, cool blaze

Interiors

Interiors have many ways to shine
every shift of silence, a universe

Cochineal gems in fissured rock
a petunia trumpets into woodwinds

In an oxbow reliquary of land
a startled fossil perorates

Where the closed eye ensembles pain
long-ago strings violin as rain

Bamboo culm or giant pine, it is
a germ of seed, a daub of shale

So too the abysm, twixt wake and sleep
wades lifetimes of sea for morning's surprise

Like recycled glass broken beautifully, held
in lattice-formed energy-works of light.

The Neverever

Learning
just through percolation
under a woolpack sky
ablaze with prisms
after a monsoon shower

The foothills' dun leather
in a ferment,
isinglass-y ponds
full of thirst,
lusty with knapweed and
mucilaginous dogbane

Summers of new exercise books
forest tinctures inhaled
in the paring of pencils
with a razor blade
clocking a pandemonium of
low-gravity ink bottles
pen-holders sharp as teeth,

The hum of conch-wells
the waterfront splashed
with phoenix colors of
the neverever earth
chronicled, lambent
with citron pebble firth.

The Statuette

In a garnet and gold dazzle, as if poised
to slip through the grainy mesh
she must crave
to be one of us
of flesh and mind

So tangible, you almost hear
her abundant joy's
heart-faint vernacular,
her violet eyes' teasing testimony
to the core of passion, where
the rose of her being blooms

Speak she does in an echo
of star-white sound,
move she does in soft ravishment

Like the tremor of creamy pollen heads
in the petal-d velvet of a chalice vine,
such pure clay made out of god.

Requiem for My Sister

Endurance is a petal flecked
with the risen sun and half-moon
of the *kumkum* fragrance
you wore above your fine-drawn eyebrows

Brave one, who spun thimblefuls
of sheer terrain with a lean spindle
of sandy light into a composition of
character, the sacred foothills of your toil
time-paths speckled bronze-gold
with your hand-print, in
a body-weave of elemental grace

Brave one, rare as a reed, fluting
sweet lilt into everyday weather,
making pasture pure with prance of feet

Visit me at this window, past the
early dew-patch, wandering fog,
the lake of heaven's charcoal dream
unable yet to wake into light

Let me hold you here, pulse to the
gale that bled under your skin and
absolved you to a blue dimness,
in the heart-well, make me
thrill to the alchemy which anointed our gene
with a ritual so distinct, so private
so miraculously unseen.

The Arrangement – A Fable

In the carefully tended void
a shiver of dew seizes first light
and the handmaiden wakens;

With a sweep of rushes
redolent with pine sap
she clears the air and
reverentially
sets about her delicate task;

She must arrange flowers
on their clipped stalks
in such a way as to
unravel runes,
spell a prophecy,
only then would

Streams rush on unseen mountainsides,
fish melt the jewel of their spines,
honey gather in ewers of aventurine,
the philomel's throat gauze
with the cool vapor of her fingers
and begin to sing.

Only then would the feathered stylus
move on birch-bark
pour its wisdom in
songs of glory and pain,
the hearths in the land enkindle again;

And when her slender fingers gently
begin to bleed she'll know it is time.

Insignia

A leaf has come to the door
so bend the ear to whence we
reinvented ourselves through
curlicues of air,
lyrated phoneme,
drifting into the
venturesome moth's
spell-drift-scintilla

To the banyan hump in the vale of reeds
hard by the velum's body-store of silk
where the quill is deep-writ in the bark's
tenuous amber, where the salt ache of
devious print, curatorial lore
carbon-calibrated parleys
have not glossed in our true worth
blown the dust-trail deep
past the paddy bowl

Read the leaf coming in at the door
which has made this long and perilous passage
preserving within lessons of riptides
sojourns of persevering pain
so we may learn to go back
once in a while to where we were
whence we came.

❑

Jayanta Krishna Sarmah

I'd Rather Sell My Labour

The master's home, where others live.

The sole condition,
the rent, monthly, should come uninterrupted
The amount agreed upon—exactly that
or else like vagabonds, change homes.

The rented homes,
on all sides,
covered in mud.
Like an adorned pigeon's nest.

Like water kept in coconut bowls in the courtyard
for domesticated pigeons.
It may or may not be sufficient for all—
but there it stands, that one well,
which dries up before
all are done drawing water from it.

Harey![1] No place for children
To play, unhindered
Yeti-Yeti paani, Gangai Raani![2]
Perhaps pigeons in the neighbourhood

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1. An exclamatory word suggesting regret and frustration.
2. This is a slogan for a game played amongst children by forming a round circle. The children point at a certain level of water which keeps increasing as the game progresses. In this sentence the children point at a level of water saying "Yeti-Yeti paani" and "Gangai Raani" is a reference to the holy river Ganges.

also live in these rented homes.
They too pay their
fixed monthly rental dues!

No, I cannot continue
fetching food,
sacrificing myself to raise my children
and then let them
sacrifice their lives paying
for this rented house!!

Is it that warm inside the rented house?
which warmth cannot be abandoned!
which love cannot be broken!
(Even at the cost of bequeathing a mortgaged life for future generations!!)

The laughter after the game of *Itiki Mitiki Dudhki Chhitiki*[3]
brings strong accusation
of depriving someone's siesta.
So friends have come together and decided
that it is now impossible to bury one's dignity
in the very land to which one belongs
    Better we stay under the stone cave
    (Ever since we learnt to run, we played beneath these very rocks!)
    We will live, leaning on the light-post

☆ ☆ ☆ ☆

I shall shed every drop of blood and rise
I'd rather make a mark in the world by selling my labour
(I'd even freeze in the cold and die, if I have to)
but not dejectedly—
not by sacrificing my dignity.

"Baru Pasina Bechheyra," *Sansad Maa Aansu Bolchha,* 2012

Translated from Nepali by Anisha Chettri.

❑

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[3] *Itiki Mitiki Dudhki Chhitiki... Jaapey Lauri Gopi Gai: This is a cheerful song which children sing and rejoice.*

Anindita Deo

All Mine

Our inadequacies
masquerading as foibles,
making us human
shaping us as imperfect objects
of perfect loves.

Our inadequacies,
like half permanent wounds.
A threatening shade
of bluish black,
like a sky of rainclouds
that won't rain.
Insidiously eating away,
tissues too precious
to be shed.

Too fresh to be scars,
too familiar to be just wounds.

Our inadequacies,
showing us a glimpse
of what could have been
but what will never be.
Conjuring up fate and maturity
as unquestionable alibis.

Our inadequacies
like the bastard child
of the only love of our lives.

A stigma
that we gladly bear,
sins we forgive ourselves
too easily,
too often.

Our inadequacies
filing us with impotent rage
that morphs into tacit acceptance
making us look heaven wards,
manufacturing saviors
who will forgive our sins.

Synecdoche

Indeterminate age,
nameless invisible scars.
The brittle resolve in her eyes,
flickers,
blazes,
and dies down, leaving
the tell tale tint of red,
and a vague hint of moistness.
She's like a storm washed morning,
weary of now-pouring sunlight.

A shape shifting creature,
bathed,
in the glaring lights,
of uncertainty.
Infinitely strong,
oozing confidence one moment,
pitifully old the next,
mouthing words no one can hear,
awash in high sea of unconceivable chaos.

She reminds you of somebody.
You know.
Knew.
Might have known.
You can't quite tell.

That spark,
like a smouldering fire gone cold,
the lingering stench of loss.
And the almost electric tension,
as if being held taut,
by two opposing,
almost maniacal forces.

Torn apart,
chasing down happiness,
while being incorrigibly beguiled by suffering.
Something,
has chafed away,
a part of her,
now when she looks at the mirror,
she sees someone she doesn't quite know.

The train draws to a halt,
people rush in,
people gush out.
She offers her seat,
to a lady with a kid.
You feel the urge to offer her yours,
but you are not sure whether she will take it,
rather, how she'll take it.

You watch transfixed,
hypnotized by the contradictions.
She meets your gaze,
you feign interest in the book in your lap.
There's something of a smile,
as she slowly pulls a wire.

Before it hits you,
the world goes blurry,
mute,
and bloody,
you do know her,
She is You.

Finished Room

In yellowing pages
standing stark,
almost carved
on a paper
that bleeds,
in stylistic font
a lone sentence.

"I could not simplify myself"

Above it
towering
capitalized
in slightly bigger font
"Suicide Note"

That hint of
borrowed bareness
how could it be yours?
a memory
you've adopted?
a pose
you've assumed?
words
you've paid the price for?

Why can't
it then
be?
Mine.

Cutting Cake

Chew on
cake
garnished
with almond scented bitterness
a dash of cynicism

is the icing
the hint of
pungent
rum
(for flavour mind you,
we have grown out of
desiring
tipsiness at noon)
redolent of
acrid certainty.
Dark sauce
of flushed
doubt.

Blow hot
blow cold.

In the corner
growing
furtively
first signs
of velvety white
mould of maturity
that you ignore
(it can't harm, can it?)

Grainy sweetness
like made up memories,
be mine.

Spring Cleaning

The twigs lie,
strewn,
a mockery
of a nest
a haze
of grey feathers
swirls
in the early afternoon breeze

swaying
to some distant rhythm.

Besides the brown twigs
and the grey down
lies the shock of yellow
like a slap on the face of
Reality:
drunk on the mellow wine-like sun
frittering away moments
with studied abandon.

Sobriety,
is the crackle
of gently trodden over
half cracked egg shells
bright
pristine white
glaring
in contrast
to the oozing yellow.

A greedy ant
floats
in the puddle
of yellow
"sucking on the marrow
of life".

Literally,
death by an overdose
of life,
life gone lifeless.

Its *Basant Panchami*
the beginning of life
herald of spring
usher of happiness
all-encompassing yellow
splattered then
to spell out

Hope
by grand Design?

Taking Flight

Stacked up thoughts
past lurks
groaning under
the present
pale
fading,
barely touchable

Fragile thoughts
dying the moment they are born
ephemera
and bitter chocolate
sheaves of slippery paper
that unwrite themselves

Signless roads
linkless chains
a Past denied
just here and now.
Growing taller.
Or just being born,
just being burnt.

❑

Vimal Kumar

Before Falling in Love

Before falling in love
We must see
The map of each other's house
Should see
Each other's limits
Who is standing where
What sort of dreams each has
Should see
Each other's courtyards
Each other's terraces
Each other's stairs
And windows too
If there is no house
Even that should be noticed
How much sky is there
over whose head
And how much shadow of a tree.

Before falling in love
One should know
The definitions of life
The truth of death
What are each other's
Perplexities and courage
Who understands
How much amount of misery
Who gives how much importance
To struggle
Or how much patience

One has
This should also be known
How much greed lies there
Within each heart
How much hatered
And how much of cruelty and violence

If before falling in love
We could read
Each other's diary
Before falling in love
We should see
Into each other
Like we see
Into a well to know
How much water is there
We should also brush
Each other's shoulders
To measure
How strong are these
Before loving
One must be
Careful and cautious
Not to repent latter
And not to blame
Each other

Love that comes
Like a tide
Breaks things into pieces
But love is also
The name of creation
Not so much
Of destruction

Falling in love
Without giving a thought
Can be immensely painful
It may be self destruction
But in fact
When one falls in love

The wisdom doesn't help
The mind gets defeated
All these precautions
Go out to the window
One struggles continuously between
Logic and emotions
For some
Logic wins
For others
Emotions
And like this
The man gets devastated
And falls in love
Very badly
With some one.

"Prem Karne Se Pahle"

Wrestling with Wolves

Every day I fight
With wolves
Hidden inside me
Day after day
They are becoming
More murderous.
Was fighting with them
On my bed at night
Till the morning
While bathing
In the bathroom
On my way
To the market
These are wolves
They need meat
Then want to sleep carefree
Somewhere in a cave
They have also been
Troubled by time
They need some happiness
But I don't want

To tell lies to these wolves
Don't want to weave a trap
Around someone
Or to sell my soul
To decieve some one
Don't want to bait a sparrow

Who doesn't want happiness?
I too wish it
But for this happiness
Can't pawn my soul
Still
In my heart
There is a deep conflict
I am afraid
I may not lose this battle
I may after all
Not be defeated
After all
I also love someone
The wolves roar now and then
They sharpen their teeth
Show their hooves
Chunks of flesh
It is not needed
To sound so violent and blood thirsty
Are the wolves
Hungry of love?

Every day
While fighting with them
I ask
Just one question
Why are they carnivorous?
But again
I see the red eyes of the wolves
I run after them
In a jungle
And in my dreams
I wrestle with them.

"Bhediye Se Guthamguth"

Image: Reflection

Do I love you
To find some of my reflection
In you

Am I looking for
My mornings and evenings
And my name
Somewhere inside you

Do I love you
Because
I am listening to my own voice
And seeing my own face
In your face
Seeing inside you
The doors of my home
Windows and stairs....

Seeing in you
My moon, my sky
And the river of my childhood
Also seeing the floating clouds in you
Do I love you
To see
My dreams in your dreams
My writing
In your writing
My anger
In your anger
My irritation
In your irritation
My restlessness
In your restlessness
My sleep
In your sleep
I love you
To see
The fire inside me
To be there in your heart

And the questions
Which trouble me
Are also there
In your heart
The path
I am treading
Opens into you....

Am I loving you
Because I hope
There is same hope
Inside you as well
Like that of mine
And the world survives on hope

This one is also
Just a hope
Between all kinds of
Hopelessness
That this world would change
A little bit
Some where
Some day.

"Bimb Pratibimb"

Translated from Hindi by Premlata.

❑

Manipuri Folktales

Hornbill

Once upon a time there was a girl called Hayainu. Her mother had passed away when she was young, her father had remarried and had a son. Hayainu was very dear to her father but the stepmother hated her. One day, Hayainu's father had to go far across the land to earn more money for the family. So he told his wife to take care of Hayainu and to be good to her. When the father left, the stepmother asked Hayainu to go and pick *yelang*[1], *kengoi*[2] and *komprek*[3] from the lake and also to catch small fish everyday so that she could sell them in the local market. Hayainu obeyed her stepmother all the time. But the stepmother was really cruel to her. Whenever Hayainu returned late after a hard day's work, she used to cane her.

As days passed, her stepmother's tortures continued and made Hayainu's life miserable. The stepmother at times used to lock her up without food. One day, Hayainu went with her friends to wash her hair with *chenghi*[4]. In the meantime, her stepmother woke up from her afternoon nap and noticed that several cows were grazing in their field. She was furious thinking that Hayainu had not looked after the field properly. She called out to Hayainu and reprimanded her cruelly, blaming her for her carelessness. Haiyanu's younger stepbrother used to feel sorry for her but he was helpless before his cruel mother.

One day, Hayainu's friends came to invite her for a community feast to be held the next day. She refused to take part in it but her friends coaxed her. So she decided she would go to the feast and asked them to pick her up. The stepmother overheard their conversation and when her friends left, she started beating Hayainu up, chastising her for indulging in unnecessary things. In reality she did not want Hayainu to socialise and lead a normal life.

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[1] Yelang: Jointweed

[2] Kengoi: Another wild herb

[3] Komprek: Dropwort

[4] Chenghi: Rice water boiled with herbs traditionally used for washing hair, a substitute for modern shampoo.

On the day of the community feast, the stepmother hatched a wicked plan. Early in the morning she got ready to go to her maternal house for a visit. She told Hayainu that she was going to visit her mother. When Hayainu was helping her brother to get ready, the stepmother took all her ornaments and good clothes so that Hayainu would not be able to go to the feast. When the stepmother left, Hayainu found out that she had taken away all her clothes and ornaments. She was very upset and started weeping till her friends came to pick her up. Hayainu told them sadly about what had happened and said she could not possibly go with them to the feast. After this incident, day by day her condition worsened and tears became her sole companion.

One night in her dream, the spirit of her deceased mother told her, "Hayainu, my daughter! I cannot bear your suffering any longer. If you really cannot survive in this world, come to the world of the langmeidongs. A group of langmeidongs come near the lake every afternoon. Request them to give some of their feathers everyday. Collect them and stitch them to your body and try to fly. Come with them to the world of the langmeidongs and I will be there." When Hayainu got up, she immediately went to the lake. She saw some Uchek langmeidongs flying across the lake. She called out to them "Hey, lovely langmeidongs! I am not able to bear the heinous tortures of my stepmother. Could you please give me some of your feathers every day till I get a basketful?"

Taking pity on her, the Uchek langmeidongs decided to give some feathers to Hayainu everyday. She collected the feathers and hid them in a basket in a corner of her room so that her stepmother would not see them. After a while, Hayainu noticed one day that her basket was full enough for her to start stitching the feathers on her body and get ready for the flight to the land of the langmeidongs. She wrapped herself up in a piece of cloth and started stitching the feathers on it one by one. When Hayainu was stitching, her young stepbrother saw her and cried, asking to her not to leave him. She told her brother that she could not bear her stepmother's torture any longer, and so she had decided to leave this world and become a langmeidong. At that moment, she saw a group of langmeidongs approaching. She requested them to help her by picking her up with their beaks. At last Hayainu flew away and the helpless brother was left alone.

He ran home and told the mother about Hayainu becoming a bird but the stepmother only said, "Good riddance!" After a few days the father who had been out of town for a while, came back. When he reached home, Hayainu was nowhere to be seen so he asked the stepmother about her. She couldn't answer so the son told him that Hayainu had become a langmeidong and had gone away from the human world. The father was furious and turned the cruel stepmother out of the house.

Hayainu's father was miserable at having lost his daughter and could not sleep or eat well worrying about his daughter's fate. He stood in his backyard and wept, "Hayainu! Hayainu! I have brought many clothes and things for you. Who will wear all these! Who will be my daughter! Please come back, my dear. I cannot survive without you, my beloved daughter!"

Everyday he cried for her return. One day, he saw a group of langmeidongs flying across the backyard and saw Hayainu among them. He brought out a plateful of rice and asked her to eat. Hayainu replied "Father! I am sorry but I cannot taste human food now because I am already a part of the langmeidong's world. I am happy in their world and I get to be with mother also. Not in this birth but in the next birth, let us meet again. Till then please take care of my brother and forgive my stepmother too. Do not weep anymore father, I will always wait for you." Her other langmeidong friends started calling her for their return. Saying thus, Hayainu left and the father lived on with the hope of meeting her again.

"Uchek Langmeidong," *Illustrated Folktales of Manipur*, 2010.

My Beloved Doll

Once upon a time, there was a rich widow who had a young daughter named Tampha whose only wish was to have a beautiful doll. She wanted to play with other children in the neighbourhood with the doll. One day she pleaded with her mother to buy her a doll. Her mother told her that she would buy the doll next day when she went to the local market. However, Tampha was so impatient that the mother went to the market that same day and bought a beautiful doll for her daughter. Tampha loved the doll very much and was very attached to it. She played with the doll everyday and even slept with it by her bedside. The doll remained beside her even when she did household chores.

Days passed, and Tampha reached her teens. Even though she was grown up now, she never left the doll. If her mother told her not to play, she did not hear her. The doll was her dearest friend and she loved it more dearly than any human friend.

One day her friends came to invite her for a community feast and they saw Tampha with the doll. Her friends were surprised and laughed at her because she was still playing with a doll. Tampha was not perturbed; she told them that she loved her doll very much and that she could not even think of leaving it for a moment. Her friends asked her whether she would take the doll to her husband's house when she got married. Tampha replied that she would surely carry the doll wherever she went.

After a few months, a proposal came for Tampha and her mother was more than happy to marry off her only daughter. But Tampha was grief-stricken not so much because she was going to leave her home but because she would have to part with her beloved doll. One night, in her dream, the doll took a human form and told her, "Thank you for taking care of me all for these years but now it is time for me to leave. I request you to bury me in the banana grove in your backyard. As a token of thankfulness, I will bestow upon you a boon. You will be able to understand the language of all the birds, insects, and animals."

When she woke up, she felt very sad and tried to recall her dream. She wanted to keep the doll but decided to follow the doll's instructions. She did exactly what the doll had directed her to do.

Soon, Tampha got married to a man named Chaonu. One day, in his house, Tampha was sweeping the floor and heard two ants talking about carrying a grain of rice. Since she could understand their language, she started laughing. Chaonu saw what was happening and became suspicious of her sanity. He wondered why his newly wedded wife was laughing all by herself like a mad woman. Again the next day, Tampha heard some lizards talking about their courtship and couldn't help laughing. Her mother-in-law saw her and wondered what had happened to her daughter-in-law.

One day, while Tampha was washing the dishes, she heard a crow talking. It said, "A corpse will be carried down by the river today. He would be wearing a ring in his right ring finger, whoever gets the ring will be very prosperous and all his wishes will come true." Tampha was really tempted to try her luck and went to the river pretending to fetch water. When she reached the river, a corpse was floating in the river. Whatever the bird had prophesised was true. She saw a beautiful ring on its right ring finger. Tampha tried to take the ring off with her hand but it was impossible since the corpse's fingers were swollen up. So, she finally decided to take it out with the force of her teeth. In the meantime, Tampha's mother-in-law, worried about why she was taking a long time to fetch water went towards the river and saw what she was doing with the dead body. The mother-in-law got petrified and came home to discuss the matter with her husband and son. They all came to the conclusion that Tampha could be a cannibalistic, possessed woman and decided to send her back to her mother's place. When Tampha came back from the river bank, they asked her about her behaviour. She tried to make everyone understand but nobody believed her story.

Tampha's mother was informed of what had happened and she was very upset. She decided to report it to the local king. The king called Tampha, Chaonu, and the mother-in-law to the court. While the king was listening to each one's story, a bird was chirping on the window-sill. The king decided to test Tampha. He got an idea instantly and asked her to tell them what the bird was saying. She told him that the bird was telling them about a pot full of gold under the mango tree in the palace backyard. The king ordered his men to dig the ground under the tree and check whether there was any gold there. After few hours the workers reported to the king that they had really found a pot full of gold. Everyone was convinced that Tampha was right and had proved herself. The king then asked Chaonu to take his wife back and live happily. But Chaonu strongly disagreed and told the king that he would not live with such an unusual girl. The king announced that he would marry Tampha and make her his queen. After a year, Tampha bore him a son.

One day while she was in her chamber, she heard a crow talking about something. "Tomorrow, there will be heavy rain and whoever drinks the rainwater will get inflicted with cholera and die. So beware! Beware, humans!" Tampha was very worried and told the king all about the prediction. The king believed her and told his messengers to announce the news in the kingdom. The next day, when the rain had stopped, the king's courtiers reported that all the villagers were saved, except some who did not believe them and drank the water and died of cholera. All the people thanked Queen Tampha for saving their lives. And thus, thanks to Queen Tampha and her extraordinary powers, the land was repeatedly saved from various calamities. Tampha was very grateful to her beloved doll all through her life for the boon.

"Eta Laidhi," *Illustrated Folktales of Manipur*, 2010.

An Old Man and Woman Who Settled Down on the Moon

Once upon a time there lived an old man and an old woman. They did not have any children. Since he was a male, the old man worked on fields and the old woman was a housewife. She cleaned the house, managed the kitchen garden, husked the paddy etc. The income he got by ploughing the field was enough for both of them to live. They were also god-fearing people. Their heartfelt prayers made the gods happy and the couple established a friendly relationship with the gods.

One fine day, the old woman was husking rice using a large wooden mortar and pestle. While she was doing that, Lord Soraren, the God of Heaven came down to meet the old man. As he was descending, the pestle (usually a long one) which the old woman was using prevented Lord Soraren from reaching the earth. After repeatedly failing to descend, he gave up and returned to heaven.

The old couple realised that Lord Soraren had returned without seeing them and they felt very sad. The old man declared, "Since Lord Soraren returned without seeing us, we shall go and visit him instead." The old woman replied, "Alright old man! Let us start our voyage tomorrow." They finished their preparations for the next day. Each of them carried their back packs. As soon as they reached Lord Soraren's abode, they saw his numerous eyes filled with anger. So they decided to go in after his anger cooled down. They said to each other "Oh maybe he is very upset with us because we did not receive him properly when he came to our house. For the time being, let us go to the moon, *Loidam Thaja Pakhangba's*[*] abode to rest for a while". They reached Loidam Thaja's place and rested for a while. Loidam Thaja's place was serene, calm and pleasant to live in. The old man and woman were so impressed with the beauty of Loidam Thaja's abode that they decided to build a small hut for themselves and settle down there. Their hut was built under a fig tree. Now that they were staying in Loidam Thaja's calm and cool place, they were transformed into a young man and woman. The now-young woman expressed her joy through her song:

Moon, moon, Thabungton!
Let me carry the young baby on my back
I will tie your baby carefully with my cloth
Kindly drop a bunch of fig
Please Thabungton!

On hearing this, Loidam Thaja dropped down a bunch of figs but to their dismay, the bunch fell right into their human waste near the house. The woman exclaimed, "Oh no! It fell into the excreta, it fell into the urine. How do we eat them!"

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[*] A name given to the moon

Therefore, they requested the moon to drop another bunch. This time they caught the bunch and ate the figs. They lived a long, happy life after eating the figs.

"Hanubi Hanubana Thada Khrundeba," *Meitei Khunnairol Phungawari, Ahanba Sharuk*, 1985.

Translated by Yaisna Rajkumari *from the Manipuri original*

❑

Symbol

Vaasanthi

There was someone standing at the threshold, or perhaps there was none. The light in the street at the entrance wouldn't reach upto the narrow threshold, going over the four steps. It has been so ever since this house was built. One must carry a lantern to be able to see the face of anyone standing over there. It was so until the advent of electricity. In the prayer room there would be a small lamp specially kept for this purpose. Only after crossing the threshold and reaching the open court-yard in the first bay could one sight a person in full. Now it looked certain that there was someone standing at the threshold.

Thrusting just her head a little forward with the back curving over the easy chair, Soundari Ammal asked, "Who's it"?

All and sundry dare not come and stand here. One must have some stature to venture to stand at Soundari Ammal's doorstep. Who could it be? Could it be Chellappa? But then why would he linger at the threshold? He would walk right in, casting off his slippers, wouldn't he? With some effort Soundari Ammal drew the loose end of the saree over her shoulder. I'm not wearing a blouse... of late it is tough passing the hand through the sleeves of a blouse. But after all this blouse itself is a late addition, isn't it? Should there be a visitor from Madras calling on her, either Sabhapati's wife Karpagam or his daughter Mallika, they would usually help her slip into the blouse. Now it seems there is someone at the door step. What do you do if someone drops in like this all of a sudden?

"*Adi*...! Karpagam! Mallika...! go and look, someone seems to be at the door." Soundari Ammal felt slightly agitated. Words got stuck in her throat. What! have I lost my voice? Mallika! Karpagam! Sabhapati!

The words rising, syllable by syllable, from the navel got buried in the throat. Was it the same voice which was extolled by the world as resonant as bronze, jingling as bells, gusty as wind? What had happened to that voice? Distressed, Soundari Ammal desperately tried again to gather the syllables, but no sound emanated.

Someone at the threshold – suddenly it struck her… Gradually the light spread in a circle, as if a curtain was being raised. Look! it is our Dhanam! Clad in a Banaras silk saree, decked with a diamond nose-drop – keeping her feet together, stretching her hands, alone, pleading, melting – singing *"May I not come…"*[1]; the music swirls up from the background with the '*jalra*'[2] ringing 'nung nung' in harmony. An electric impulse coursed through Soundari all along her nerves; the whole body melted; the eyes moistened; the head and the hands moved in joy.

The syllables soared from the pit of the stomach and burst out from the throat:

"May I not come
To stand close by you
And sing and celebrate you
May I not come"

She was beside herself in ecstasy. Where is the need for a separate sanctum sanctorum? Dance, Dhanam, dance! Don't stop it. How many years since I saw you dance! But when she raised her head after wiping the tears that had screened her eyes there was no Dhanam at the threshold. Just some shadows.

"It was so crowded in the bazaar, *Akka*[3], that's why I got delayed" said Karpagam as she emerged into the light in the open yard. She felt as if she was struck at the temple. Ineffable disappointment quickly gripped the chest.

"Did any one come looking for me *Akka*?" asked Sabhapati.

"Not for you".

"For you then? Was it Chellappa?"

"No, no".

Soundari was confused.

"Are you all right, *Akka*?[4]"

"Nothing. May be I was dreaming."

"Dream?"

Soundari softly smiled. "Yes, it looked so real. Who do you think appeared in the dream? It's Dhanam who stands over there in a Banaras silk saree and diamond nose-drop! Just as she was in those days! She even danced for me. You must have seen her mime the *bhava*[5] for 'May I come in?' My, my! that's dance, that's dance I say!"

Sabhapati looked at Karpagam and smiled. "Please bring a cup of coffee for me Karpagam, you might also bring the spinach over here. Me and *Akka* will clean it up, cut and keep it ready for cooking".

Soundari Ammal was still in a state of delusion and gazed at the threshold. It was all pitch dark.

Was it really a dream?

“Please have the coffee”, Karpagam spoke, offering the drink, spreading the spinach over the bamboo winnowing-pan. Even that appeared to be happening in a dream. But then the ecstasy arising from watching Dhanam dance seemed true. How could one dismiss as dream the way she stood, held the ‘*mudra*’[6] the pleading saturated in the eyes, oh, my, my, how do you call all that a dream?

The sensation of the thrill which ran through the body was still there. The ‘*sangatis*’[7] rose wave after wave from the depths and were souring as ‘*karvais*’[8].

“May... I... come in my Lord?” ·

“What’s it *Akka*? is Dhanam still standing there?”

Soundari Ammal smiled, turning the gaze from the threshold while weeding the spinach. Sabhapati was chopping the leaves fine with the help of the knife in concentration. Wanting to say something more about Dhanam’s dance with great enthusiasm, Soundari however became silent. It was incredible that Sabhapati should have changed like this. At the age of eight the “finishes” he could exhibit while playing the *mridangam* were stunning. She was certain that he could beat all the ‘*vidhwans*’ (acclaimed musicians) of the day hollow. It was his father who, by obstinately sending him to school, killed his music. A clerk’s job; marriage after forty, a wife who is a teacher; social respectability, it is such nonsense which serves as the “finish” now. It looks as though the blood itself has been transformed.

“It is about ten years since she died, isn’t it?”

“Who?”

“Dhanam, *Akka*.”

“Hum, may be even more, towards the end she was living like a ‘*tapasvi*’[9]”. Sabhapathi was engaged in cutting the spinach without lifting his head.

“Yes. I’ve heard about it”.

“There was a gentleman called ‘Rangone’ Sundaram. Bewitched by Dhanam’s dance he decked her with gold and diamonds. You see, when she heard that he became insolvent, and that towards the end of his life he was even finding it difficult to lead a hand-to-mouth existence, you know, what this Dhanam did? She took all the jewellery, silver-ware, everything that he had presented her, in a bundle and gave it to Sundaram’s wife. Stunned, Sundaram’s wife, prostrated at her feet, I believe.”

“There have been people like that.

"How else could it be? It is Knowledge, Sabhapati! Where there is knowledge, there is goodness."

"Is the spinach ready for cooking?" Karpagam said in a somewhat raised voice. "Mallika and Senthil will be home soon for lunch."

Soundari became silent. It was a signal from Karpagam that they had spoken enough.

"It's all cut and ready, you may take it," said Sabhapati.

When Karpagam walked over with her toe rings making noise, to collect the spinach, the *mangalsutra*[10] was dangling to and fro like a swing.

"Shall I make *'Karakulambu'* mashing the spinach?"

The voice of Karpagam softened in a conciliatory way.

"Do. If you think Mallika and Senthil would like it that way go ahead."

"You see, I am making potato roast for them separately."

Soundari knew that if the conversation was kept in this tenor, there would be peace in the house even if Karpagam wasn't quite pleased. Why are these folks such cowards still? They are frightened of ghosts; they get startled at their own shadows. Every word that comes out of my mouth appears to them frightening as a spirit. But for my pension, this Karpagam would have driven me out on the streets long back.

The job of weeding the spinach over, Soundari leaned back in the easy chair.

All along the stretch of the walls in the hall hung framed photographs: faded black and white ones. Soundari with a penny-sized *bindi* on the forehead with diamond ear studs and diamond nose jewel, all smiles. The citations for the awards received from eminent men and (patrons) ministers from Travancore to Baroda, 'Sangita Bhushani', 'Gana Soundari', 'Gana Saraswati', 'Kalaimamani' — and many more. One does not even remember. But, can one forget the music, which was the very breath of one's life? She has one foot in the grave now. Even then whenever she listens to music, doesn't it tingle all her nerves? A minister said in Hyderabad that the name of Soundari Ammal was synonymous with music. There you have the photo at the extreme right. Indeed, he uttered the truth. How can these people forget all that? Do they forget to take the pension money from her? 'How sad that I am reduced to just a sign for these wretched folks!' Soundari closed her eyes in exhaustion. The mind gradually regains its calm. They are not to blame. But so long as I'm alive nobody can change my heart. You make *'karakulambu'* or *'maciyal'*, what do I care? What draws me is very different. "Sabhapati, why don't you turn the radio on, don't we get some music now?"

It was all noisy to begin with, then the music came on.

"Divine mother, you are my companion
Oh, you, fish-eyed one of
South Madurai!"...

Suddenly all mundane concerns and objects receded. Soundari was in a different world. Riding on the clouds of '*ragas*' she reached the sanctum sanctorum.

"...Mo... ther...!"

Damn it! why did this woman stop here? There is so much scope for '*sangati*'. These days the practice of singing *sangati*, is almost gone. God knows whether it is sheer laziness. One must speak to Chellappa.

"What Sabhapati, why have you stopped the music?"

"It's me, who stopped it *Athai,*[11]" said Senthil.

"The music was no good. Was it?"

"It wasn't all that bad though there was not much of '*sangati*' worth speaking of. In any case you don't fancy much our kind of music."

"It's not because of that. There is someone who has come."

"Who is it?"

"Who knows? Father is talking to them with great courtesy."

Why does this boy get so angry?

"That's all right. Come and have your grub. When you are hungry you tend to lose your temper for every little thing," said Karpagam chiding him in a low tone.

"Sabhapati, who's it?"

"Someone has come from Madras. It seems she wants to do an interview for a magazine."

"Interview whom?"

"You, who else?"

"Me!"

Before she could find out the details, here is Senthil bustling inside.

"Athai, don't ever give any interview."

For a moment, she was dumbstruck. The face and the intensity in his eyes brought back all kinds of memories. This fellow is just twenty two, but that anger seems very old.

Soundari Animal, ignoring Senthil, greeted the girl who came into the yard and held her hands together paying her respects. It seemed as though there was some connection to that girl by birth.

☆ ☆ ☆ ☆

Chellappa felt somewhat bleary-eyed. His neck was hurting from the effort to read line by line, bending for two hours over the crumbling pages of that book. The fan in the library was not even in proper working condition. Chellappa alone could absorb whatever he read in the din made by the fan.

That will do for today! Chellappa closed the book with great care and kept it in the shelf and took leave of the librarian, Santhanam, as he would of a member of the family.

"It looks as though this library is kept open exclusively for your sake," said Santhanam.

"Our people have not at all been in the habit of reading books. Even the few who used to come are now sitting in front of the TV."

Chellappa tried to make an exit under the pretext of spitting the *paan*. Santhanam would not stop now. It was embarrassing to see him feel distressed as if some priceless personal treasure was being wasted.

"But you see Chellappa, it's enough if there are a handful of people like you," said Santhanam as if to comfort himself.

"Remember your father's dream to make you into a great intellectual – to see you today as a college professor..." Feeling embarrassed at where the conversation was heading, Chellappa came out of the library nodding his head with a smile.

Santhanam had spoken these same words several times before. Even then, listening to him each time, Chellappa felt thrilled. It was also a little disturbing that Santhanam had the same thought each time he saw Chellappa. It created a faint sense of shame in him.

These thoughts followed him as he walked towards home. Father never used to walk these streets wearing his shirt or sandals. Father being tall and majestic, Chellappa, his last child, had to run to catch up with his stride while walking.

Whenever there was a summon from the *mirasdar*[12] at Mettu street, father would run with such haste. The *mirasdar*, sitting over the swing decorated with silver caps, kicking the cement floor in the front yard of his four-bay house, would stop oscillating the swing seeing father approach. The majestic body would shrink. The back would bend over.

"Did you call me, *Sami*?"

The way father held himself would make it appear to Chellappa that the person sitting on the swing was none other than the Lord himself. Taking out the betel leaves from the silver box and stripping the central stem, the master would say, "My daughter's marriage has been fixed. In the coming month of *Thai*, there are half a dozen auspicious days. Tell me, which date would suit you. You are performing."

Father's face would bloom as if he had received a boon.

"Of course, I will. D'you mean to say that I would ever say no to playing at a marriage in our house, *Sami*?"

However, with the accountant suggesting a number of auspicious dates for the *muhurtham*[13], father would agree to one of them saying, "That would be convenient, *Sami*."

"Fine, fine. Let's fix the date for the marriage on that day."

The landlord would say when father was about to go, "You must play 'Saraguna Palimpa' during the wedding procession, don't forget." Father would be all smiles, baring his *paan*-stained teeth, much pleased.

"Without fail *Sami*."

Father would float in ecstasy all the way back home. Now and then he would gently smile with affection at the little fellow walking along with him. From that day onwards there would be daily rehearsals of 'Saraguna Palimpa'. During the *Jaanavasam*[14] standing at the centre of the street, drawing his breath, when father played the *raga* Sankarabaranam or Mohanam, holding the '*nayanam*' majestically in his hand, he would indeed appear to be the lord of the earth. There would be an illusion that all the rest of them – the accompanists, the landlord and the groom's father, the folks in the street nodding their heads in sheer delight — were his servants. Chellappa would be bursting with pride. After the procession was over or when the '*muhurtham*' was over, father and his party along with Chellappa would be waiting in the stone-pillared '*mandapam*' at the far end of the street. All the guests would have left after the feast. Chellappa would have fallen asleep in his father's lap out of hunger and fatigue. At last food would arrive in a bucket. Father would take the towel from over his shoulders and hold it stretched out. The rice, vegetables, '*kootu*', '*pitlai*' and '*morkulambu*', all mixed up in one mass, would descend into the outstretched towel along with the banana leaf. Sitting in the '*mandapam*', they would eat the food and discard the banana leaf by the ditch, and rinse the mouth; and while returning home the body would feel inert.

Recalling all that now, Chellappa felt astonished. Father had never once grumbled about it. But he had certain convictions. One did not know whether it was the result of a sense of a lack of distress.

The heat of the sun was scorching. Must buy a new umbrella. The umbrella that he had till last week was taken away by someone at the library. "You were complaining not a soul visits the library except me, weren't you? Now see, someone else has been here apparently; he has whisked away my umbrella." Both of them were laughing. Only when the heat of the sun strikes you, you realize the value of the umbrella.

He also remembered that it was a symbol of a status that his father never enjoyed.

Shading his eye with his hand, Chellappa kept walking. Thank God, at least he has the comfort of a footwear. The footwear too is a symbol. The shirt, *Angavastram*,[15] all of them are symbols. Because they were all denied to father, he felt that he was without an identity.

It was only when he was crossing North Masi street that Chellapa noticed that girl. She appeared to be a resident from a metropolis, either Madras or Bombay. Surely not from this town. To avoid the sun she had covered her head with the loose end of the saree and was wearing dark glasses. On seeing Chellappa she said, "Excuse me, can you direct me to Soundari Ammal's house?"

"Of course," replied Chellappa, "You will come to a square at the end of this very street. If you keep to the left, it is the last house."

"Thank you," she said smiling. "I hope she'll be at home. Won't she?"

"Where do you think she will go? She is eighty two."

"Thanks," saying so the girl started moving in the direction pointed out by him, and Chellappa, for his part, started walking towards home. He was in the habit of addressing Soundari Ammal as 'Athai'. The very thought of her would fill him with pleasure. Involuntarily the face would brighten up, just as it would while thinking of his father. In many ways there wasn't much difference between Athai and his father, it appeared.

"I should have brought an umbrella," thought Mandakini. She knew it would be hot down south. But nobody told her that it would burn you up like this. It appeared to her that there was little difference between the heat in Rajasthan in summer and that here. The glare of the pale white sunlight was too much. However, it seemed that even as there was a connection between the heat of the sun and the colours, there was a connection between art and sound and rhythm. Like the connection between lust and love, between violent passion and shame.

As if there were no relation whatsoever between her thoughts and the truth, the streets were lying asleep, burying within them all the colour and sound. "Who would want to talk to you if you go and knock at closed doors? They'll send you back with a good bashing," Mother had warned. "Don't you have some other topic to write about?" Indeed there were many. But this seemed to be a matter inalienably fused with her innermost feeling. She must write on this someday, such was the passion that raged in her. No matter who responds or who doesn't, she must go and meet grandmother's friend, Soundari Ammal.

The temple tower was visible from a distance. *Paatti*[16] had said, 'Everything generated from there'. Mother didn't have grandmother's perspicacity. It struck Mandakini that it was a curtain mother had deliberately drawn. For the doctor's profession, which mother was practising, all this was unnecessary research. For that matter, mother had never visited this place.

This is the place where grandmother was born. In this small town, where even today there was not a single decent hotel to stay, a revolution had taken place fifty years ago, changing the course of history. A revolution launched by *Paatti*.

Whenever you ask grandmother how it was at all possible, she would gaze into the distance. The muscles in her face, which was even now fair and tender, would become taut.

"One day you go to the place where I was born, look for a house called 'Rangavilas' in East Masi street. It was there in the cowshed at the backyard in the sixth year of my life that the revolution exploded."

As soon as she reached this town yesterday, she located 'Rangavilas' with the help of the address grandma had given, she had found the house locked. She knocked at the next door and in broken Tamil asked the *maama*[17] who put out only his face, "Is there no one in the next house?"

"No one," replied the brahmin gentleman. "For long years no one has been there. It belongs to a *mirasdar* called Rangam Iyer. He had no children."

"What d'you mean? He did have children, didn't he?" said the *maami* from within.

"I meant that he had no children from his wife."

"Is it possible for me to see that house?" Mandakini wanted to know. "Any idea, who will have the keys for the house?"

"Why, would you like to buy the house?"

The words came out unpremeditated. "I am writing a book on old houses in Tamil Nadu. It seems to me, this house too might look nice from the inside."

"Sure, sure, it's indeed a splendid house. All teak wood; the flooring all marble even in those days. It's a pity that there are no buyers. The keys are with me, I shall show you around."

This was, surely, an unexpected stroke of luck. The front door itself was finely carved with brass bells hanging, gleaming brightly even now. When the door opened with the lock withdrawing with a loud noise, the bells jingled. As she set foot inside, something stirred in the pit of her stomach as if one were in search of someone's innermost secrets.

Although there was a touch of dank odour, the premises appeared certainly clean.

"The house is cleaned once a fortnight," said the brahmin gentleman.

The central hall and the walls spoke of a history of over hundred years old; the teakwood swing with the brass ornamental caps. As the image of the person who used this swing rose up as a cloud in her mind, "This is the photo of Rangam Iyer," remarked the brahmin gentleman. It was a shock to find the resemblance between that face and mother's. The same eyebrows, the same nose, the same mouth. There were a whole lot of pictures all over the walls, and Mandakini eagerly searched for something among them. At last one of them caught her eyes. Grandmother after the graduation ceremony wearing the black cloak and holding the scroll. Some ineffable feeling surged within her, inundating the being. In the next one there were grandmother and her brothers and sisters. Wiping the dust on it with the help of the handkerchief, she asked.

"Who are these?"

"Rangam Iyer's children, that is, the ones born to his mistress."

"So they were brought up here, weren't they?"

"God forbid! Certainly not! No one was allowed to set foot inside the house. He was highly orthodox, I heard. It seems he would visit the mistress's house but would never think of having even a glass of water there."

Mandakini turned and looked at Rangam Iyer's face. She wondered, how is that the mistress bore him so many children!

The gentleman opened the rooms one after the other. It was a big house with four bays — the mosaic floors over which the children's feet had never trodden; walls which never echoed with the sounds of laughter; the dark pillars casting shadows like ghosts around the yard. The sun rays lancing through the chimney in the kitchen at the rear bay created strange images.

"Meals were cooked here for his mistress's family too. But nobody would carry it over there; she must wait at the backyard with the children and carry it herself."

"I know."

"What did you say?"

"Nothing. I said, how strange!"

"What's strange about it? That was how it was those days. Rangam Iyer too was very strict. As soon as he returned from the mistress's house, he would go straight to the well, have a bath and only then enter the house. There were scores of people those days who ruined themselves in their mistress's house. But she was different. Using the money Rangam Iyer gave her, she sent her girls out to study and put them in hostels."

"Let's see the backyard."

"What is there for you to see? Nothing much. Just the dilapidated cowshed."

"Doesn't matter."

"As you please."

The wooden door opened with a loud screeching noise. The heart trembled while setting foot in the backyard crossing over the stone steps lying helter-skelter. A dilapidated cowshed with the roof gone. Wild shrubbery had grown profusely around. A mango tree—they stood underneath the tree, waiting for their meal—the mistress and her five or six children. It must have been then that the storm would have raged in the heart of the six-year-old girl.

The revolution must have burst out – in the mind of the mother.

Mandakini was trying to read the name of the street letter by letter —N-O-R-T-H-M-A-A-S-I Street. Who would be able to tell her about Soundari Ammal's house?

She could see a man coming in the opposite direction. Because he did not have an umbrella, he was holding his right hand slanted over the eyes, which could not bear to see the glare of the sun. To him she said, "Could you direct me to Soundari Ammal's house?"

Chellappa muttered to himself, must see Soundari Athai this evening, 'Why would a city-bred girl remember Soundari Ammal, who was famous forty years ago and now almost forgotten? He thought that he should have warned the girl, that woman was an extremely sensitive person. He should have told her, "Athai is one who has swallowed up all your metropolitan feminism."

'You know well, don't you, no one dared to take liberties with this Soundari! Self-respect is what matters to her. For the sake of that she has given up performing on the stage!' How many today can boast of such clarity, pride and knowledge?

"Hello, *Annachi*[18]! Is it cool as full-moon light for you?"

For a moment he was taken aback to see Mallika standing there, her face turned dark red in the heat, wiping the sweat with handkerchief. Soundari Athai at this age would have been like this. "What about you? Is a cool wind blowing?"

"Can't help it. It's Saturday. College is over. I'm going home. So, you are returning from the library? Shouldn't you have carried an umbrella with you?"

Chellappa tells the story of his umbrella. Mallika burst out laughing. She then bit her lip looking at the wrist watch.

"Oh my God! *Annachi*, let me rush. Senthil will bawl at me if I'm even a little late in coming home after college hours. Appa and Athai would not say anything. Only he would shout at me."

"Why?"

"Perhaps he imagines that he is the man of the house! Amma also would dance to his tune. Such a nuisance! I'm not even allowed to attend the music class. I must speak to you one of these days about many things..."

Chellappa was not sure how to respond to this.

"He doesn't even like my mumbling snatch of a song. I can't help it – I feel like singing all the time. Music comes out as naturally as breathing."

Mallika suddenly laughed.

"Let me drop in one day and tell you the tale of my woe. How is *Anni*[19]? Is she well?"

"She must be well. She has gone to her mother's place at Thiruvarur."

"Why don't you then come home for lunch?"

"No. Thanks. I am going to the 'lodge'. It appears, there is already a guest at your house."

Mallika's eyes became wide in surprise.

"Who's that?"

"I don't know. I guess it could be someone from Madras."

"How d'you know?"

"Just a guess."

"How fine! Man or woman?"

"Woman."

"Then your guess must be right."

Mallika burst out laughing and as she started walking towards the house, Chellappa felt angry that Senthil too, like his father Sabhapati was a blockhead.

Once again memories of father came up. In Thiruvarur a music performance had got over at a wedding. Two people were debating on the intricacies of a composition of Dikishithar's and father intervened and said something.

"You keep quiet," said one of them. "After all you are a player of the pipe. What do you know? Don't dare to talk."

Father did not utter a word till he returned home. In the night lying on the rushmat in the terrace, staring at the moon, father turned towards him and said, "Chellappa, you should never think of taking up my profession."

"You must study. Learn Sanskrit. Not Tamil."

His son should become a scholar. It was not a dream, but a passion. Only in his education lay father's liberation.

"Who could it be?" Mallika was trying to hazard hundred guesses as she was trying to reach home post-haste. None of the guesses were interesting. Suddenly her legs felt hesitant. It could be someone seeking a bride. Mother is very keen. What annoys her the most however is that Senthil is even keener. After all he is just four years older than her, but he tries to rule her, she felt furious.

'I am resolved not to marry, who cares if someone comes asking for a bride? I want to study, I must learn music.'

Her imagination extended so far that she reacted as if there was definitely some one seeking alliance, and as if she was being forced towards the marriage dais with Senthil standing guard challengingly. Anger started welling from within. What does this Senthil think? He goes to movies, goes to light music programmes. But I may not go anywhere. I may not sing either.

"Who are you to control me? I will sing," when she retorted thus one day, Senthil and her mother were stunned as if confronted by a ghost.

"The first thing that we must do is to marry her off," he said, as if there was someone waiting for her in the street. "It is then her husband's funeral."

Mother too burst out in anger that day. "They will ask, does she take after the aunt or after the mother?"

"Be quiet for a while, Karpagam," only when father in a rare moment of authority chided her, did mother stop wailing. Mother must have forgotten in her fury the thousand odd rupees by way of pension that Athai was receiving.

Mallika was not sure whether all this was within Athai's earshot. But, she was sure that Athai was far above all this meanness. As far as she could recall Athai had been a limb of the family. She had never ever heard Athai talk about cooking, meals, relations etc. She would for ever be listening to music on the radio. Sometimes, she would be singing to herself. Mallika's heart would surge with enthusiasm to hear her voice even now emerging resonant and with absolutely no dissonance. There were enough evidences all over the walls in the form of framed testimonials that Athai was once upon a time a famous musician. Even these twenty years when she has not stirred out of the house, but sitting in the easy chair she would appear as if she were an undisputed queen of some great empire.

Athai had no husband, no children. "Her husband died," said mother. But Athai sported a big round vermillion *'bindi'* on her forehead. The diamonds on her ears and nose glittered even from the dull forty watts light in the central hall.

Forgetting for the moment that Mallika was only twelve years old, aunt bluntly said to her one day, "My dear, nobody ever married me."

"The men would have been frightened of your genius."

Athai laughed.

"I decided against it. I was firm that I wouldn't give up music even if I married. No fellow was willing. Once you are born in that community no matter how much knowledge you possessed there was no honour. The very men born in this community would dig your grave."

"Did they try to do that to you?"

"They did! But d'you mean to say that this Soundari would yield to all that?"

It seemed a laughing matter to Mallika. It was like a secret shared only between aunt and niece.

"What is honour and what people think as honour are different from each other, d'you understand?"

She did understand, but only gradually. Because Senthil could not understand this, he was trying to bury Mallika's aspirations several fathoms deep and that made her furious.

Not sure whether to enter the house or not, she stood at the entrance.

"Thank you very much. Thanks a lot," so saying that girl emerged from the house still peeping inside, and walked down the steps.

When he saw Mallika, father introduced her saying, "She is my 'daughter'. Doing 'Plus 2'."

"I see. Does she sing?" the girl asked.

"No! No," father answered hastily.

"Mallika, come inside!" With Senthil ordering her peremptorily Mallika went inside with a deep sense of shame.

"Why does this Senthil yell like this, Athai?" she said in a low tone.

"God knows. That girl was just casually talking, she was very eager to hear me sing."

"What do you people know about journalists?" shouted Senthil. "They write all kinds of nonsense."

"Look, she's my friend's granddaughter, for your information."

"Precisely. That's why I say we shall have nothing to do with them."

It seemed, Senthil's wrath was understandable. At the same time it made her feel very weary that a slip of a boy could talk like this.

"I say, Senthil, keep quiet for a while, won't you? What's your age and what is Athai's?" Sabhapati seemed to be scolding his son just to keep up appearances. Sabhapati is afraid of his son. Should she die tomorrow, he was at his son's mercy.

Softly a hand felt over hers. Soundari turned round to look.

"You said friend's granddaughter. Whose friend?" Mallika whispered. Soundari gently smiled.

"I'll tell you some other day, dear."

Darkness quickly started to envelop the open courtyard. Someone switched on the light. Soundari couldn't yet believe that the girl who called on her was Rathinam's granddaughter.

As the girl went on talking it looked as though time slipped back fifty odd years. Rathinam's spirit, indignation, courage, all were revived before her eyes.

"In the name of God a big fraud is being perpetrated, Soundari." When she was so agitated the finger aligning the *'tampura' sruti* would stand still.

"Soundari, in no other country is there such treatment meted out to women in the name of codes and traditions. Wake up. This society is cheating us wholesale, exploiting us, leaving us the legacy of diseases, humiliating us."

Her face would turn red. The spectacles she had to wear, thanks to her higher education, would keep slipping down again and again.

"Rathinam, you are an educated woman. How many people d'you think would listen to what you say?"

"True. Nothing would happen by just my talking. Everybody must join together. All of us should raise our voices. We must come out in the open and fight."

It was all amusing then.

"In the open?"

"Of course! Haven't they pitched our honour out in the streets? D'you mean to say that we enjoy any respect in this society? You're such a renowned musician. Dhanam is such a great dancer. They invite you to perform at weddings. But, have you ever noticed where they keep you and serve food? In the backyard – not in the dining hall."

You couldn't meet her arguments. You couldn't tell her this is the custom here. She'd retort, whoever gave them such authority? Was it God? Was it the same God who also said, you must dance in the temple as a service to God, be tied in marriage to the stone-god after which any man can take you?

"Many a woman have been trapped in their deceit. They've all gone to dogs, besides getting the name of every one sullied. This should not continue, Soundari."

There was some power in her words. How many women came up as if bound by a spell! As if getting ready for a freedom fight!

It was then that Dhanam stopped dancing. I could give up everything. But not the music. "We must be prepared for a lot of sacrifice if we are to fight, Soundari." I couldn't. Didn't I feel choked by sorrow when I said that I might as well take poison and be dead? Rathinam got up and left without a word.

"Get married, first. Then sing," she said as though there was someone waiting.

"Athai, why did you stop performing on the stage?" asked Mallika sitting down close to her.

Suddenly Soundari felt tired. After all these days she felt a helplessness rapidly seizing the pit of her stomach.

Some rifraff wants me to sing a song from the movie 'Manmada Leelai'. She utters something lewd, the crowd laughs. Was it sorrow or was it anger that what Rathinam said after all had come true? I wasn't sure. All performance was given up at that moment.

"Somehow I didn't feel like singing. Leave it at that."

"You'll disclose it in the interview. You won't tell me, I suppose."

"Who's going to conduct the interview?" entered Chellappa whom Soundari greeted saying, "Come, come." "Mallika is asking why I stopped singing on the stage."

"You don't know how sensitive your Athai is," said Chellappa.

"What's the good of my sensitivity? Speak of Rathinam's sensitivity."

"How come you are thinking of Rathinam today?"

"Her granddaughter had come to interview me."

Chellappa's eyes became wide.

"Oh! I see, that was Rathinam's granddaughter, was it?"

"What did she ask you?"

"She wanted to know how things were those days. Why should I hesitate to speak out to my friend's granddaughter? It is because of this that Senthil is making such a hue and cry, as if the earth had quaked."

After a while Chellappa got up, lost in deep thought. While going past the junction where the four roads meet, Rathinam and the band of followers she had gathered, raised slogans. It was a wonder that father too shouted louder and louder. In all that slogan-shouting the jingling of the dancer's bells, the sound of the '*sruti*' box, were all drowned.

The whole street became empty. Distancing themselves from the monstrous memory, everyone settled down to a life in a family set-up. Respectability too came to them. There was no need for slogans anymore. No earthquake would shake the world.

Shake it did, a fortnight later. Like a tornado, Senthil came in with a magazine in hand and threw it down in the open courtyard at the center.

"Gone, I say, thrown to the four winds, our honour! See for yourself," he said to his aunt in sheer wrath. "We can't hereafter go round as decent people in society. We can't have Mallika married off..."

Fear gripped everybody's face. Senthil did something he had not ever done so far. Sitting on the stool he sank his head in his hands and broke down into uncontrollable sobs. His crying seemed more menacing than his anger.

Aunt's face became suffused with panic.

"Come on, tell me, what's written there that has upset you so much?"

"The whole world has been told about your community. I warned you not to give any interview, didn't I?"

The magazine lay at the dead centre of the open courtyard like a burning torch. No one dared to go anywhere near it.

"Mallika, why don't you pick it up and read it out?" suggested the Aunt feebly.

Mallika was shocked out of her wits. It was incredible that Senthil should scream and cry like this.

"Have they mentioned the community?"

"Yes."

"Nothing else is mentioned?"

"What does it matter what else is said? What if you've been praised sky high? Does it matter at all?" hissed Senthil.

Aunt was sitting stunned. Sabhapati would not look up. Karpagam stood panting, as if holding back her anger, vicariously satisfied at Senthil's outburst.

"How can I help it Senthil?" said Aunt. In low tone, she added "Bring me some poison, if you like. I shall consume it and be gone."

It was Mallika who couldn't help crying at this.

There was no need for anyone to bring poison. The next day while asleep in the night the eighty-two years old Soundari Ammal breathed her last. At least that was what the doctor who was called said. It was only ten days later, when Sabhapati went up to clear the wall shelf used by his sister that he found the foil pieces betraying the removal of sleeping pills from inside. And it was then that the question arose, how come they were there when Soundari was not used to taking sleeping pills?

Sabhapati did not utter a word. In the month of *Thai* that year Mallika's marriage could not be settled. To Chellappa who offered to put her in the music class, Mallika said, "No, none of that anymore."

Translated by C.T. Indra *from the Tamil original,* "Chinnam," *Tamil India Today,* 1995.

References

1. *May I not...* : A famous song in Tamil beginning, "Varugalamo Aiyya..." from Gopalakrishna Bharati's Nandanar Charitram, often presented in Bharatanatyam recitals.
2. *Jalra* : Small cymbals used to keep rhythm in singing and dancing.
3. *Akka* : Respectful way of addressing one's husband's elder sister.
4. *Akka* : Elder Sister.
5. *Bhava* : A term in Bharata Natyam referring to emoting an experience.
6. A term in Bharata Natya referring to certain codified gestures of representation.
7. Sangati is a term in carnatic music referring to embellishment of a line from a composition by skilful extensions and variations.
8. *Karvai* : another term in carnatic music referring to an unwavering, rippleless expansion of a note.
9. A 'tapasvi' is a female ascetic performing penance.
10. *Mangalsutra* : Symbol of her married status for a Hindu woman.
11. *Athai* : a kinship term to refer to paternal aunt.
12. *Mirasdar* : Title conferred upon land-owing gentry by the Moghuls and the British.
13. *Muhurtham* : The auspicious hour at which the 'mangalsutra' is tied to solemnize a marriage.
14. *Janavasam* : Ceremonial procession of the bridegroom on the eve of the marriage.
15. *Angavastram* : A piece of cloth pleated and thrown across the bare part of the body over the shoulders by men.
16. *Paatti* : Grandmother
17. *Maama* : A term often used to refer to any Brahmin gentleman and '*maami*' is used to refer to any brahmin woman.
18. *Annachi* : A term to accost another man with whom one is familiar.
19. *Anni* : Sister-in-law (ie), elder brother's wife. Here it refers to the wife of someone elder in age to oneself.

Thirst

A.J. Thomas

The three of us set off for the hill-temple at dawn.

My younger brother Hari was lukewarm about the trip from the very beginning. He didn't want to dance to others' tunes. But he had no other option but to join in.

My brother and I were leading a bachelor's life in the township on the fringes of the wildlife sanctuary. I was in government service as a clerk in the Village Office; my brother had just finished school, and was spending some time with me, for he had nothing better to do at home, under the nose of a disciplinarian father and a nagging mother. He felt that whatever he did, wherever he turned to, would be found fault with. One of our sisters, the eldest among us, was married to a family in Malabar. The other sister, the youngest, was studying in UP School. She was the darling of the family. Hari was all of sixteen, and was neither here, nor there. His voice had recently thickened, the hair above his upper lip had darkened and muscles were rounding on his calves, thighs and arms…and yet he felt no one took him for a man. A boy he no longer was, he felt sure. His mother began to refuse to dry his hair after his bath. She wouldn't accompany him anymore to the make-shift latrine at the far end of the compound at night. "You have grown into a big ox; be a man, you shouldn't be afraid of ghosts or yakshis…." This was the only time she would acknowledge that he was a 'man.' He would go alone, warding off fear reciting the 'Arjunappattu,' the ten synonyms of the hero of the *Mahabaratam*…."Arjunan, Parthan, Vijayan, Kireeti…."

I was just twenty-two, and quite lucky to get a government job a year before. Living in a rented house all alone and eating from local hotels, I was really bored, and when my brother joined me, the first thought that crossed my mind was that we could start cooking at home right-away. Soon I found how wrong I was! That spoilt brat of a kid brother did not even know how to wash the rice for cooking. However, I was determined not to run up a credit account at the hotel, on account of a brother who ate like a buffalo. With a kerosene stove and a couple of aluminium pots and pans, I kicked off our cooking experiment. I had tried my hand at it earlier too, while at home, helping Mother when she was sick, as is the lot of most elder children. After two weeks of it here, I was gradually growing versatile. Besides omelette, I had successfully made a chicken curry the other day.

It was at this point that our first cousin, Vijayan, who was a sub-inspector in the Border Security Force, now home on leave, decided to pay us a visit—obviously not for any love lost between us but because of the proximity of the world-famous wildlife sanctuary, a visit to which was the fantasy of all schoolchildren in the plains. So, our cousin had chosen an opportune time to fulfill his childhood fantasy—while I was posted here!

We at home used to wonder how Vijayan had got into a security force like the BSF. He was just the opposite of the valorous, adventure-loving, devil-may-care-minded young man who was raring to get into the Army to defend the country against its many adversaries. Vijayan was in fact the 'mura-cherukkan' or the groom-by-custom of our elder sister, he being the son of our father's sister. However, Chechi spurned him at the first advance, calling him 'koozha', (the succulent-kernelled jack-fruit—a derogatory term used to describe a spineless young man.) But now he was well-developed, broad-chested, prematurely balding ("wearing the peaked-cap all the time, the sweat would sink into my scalp, and the hair got rotten and fell off," he quipped flaunting his SI-hood, and revealing some sense of humour he had lately picked up on the way.) and wore an almost-handlebar moustache. Altogether a comic figure, as Hari whispered in my ear.

Vijayan more than made up for his past lapses and present uninvited visit, by cooking excellent food. He specialised in meat and fish preparations, both fry and curry. He made the tapioca puzhuku expertly like Mother did at home. A mamma's boy, he had been trailing his mother in the kitchen from an early age, and had obviously made good use of his mostly-in-kitchen life at home. The knowledge of cooking served him well while posted in remote boarder-posts all by himself along with a couple of men, he said. The bottle of brandy he opened further loosened the last braces of grimness over our faces. Hari's nostrils dilated, taking in the aromatic fumes of the spirit. "What are you watering your mouth for, you're merely a boy," I admonished him like a dutiful elder brother and a seasoned drinker. In fact I had tasted liquor only on a few occasions previously in the one year of my government service—the last one during the farewell party given to the Tehsildar who retired last month. "I will tell Mother that you've become a boozer," he retorted and jumped away as I swung one at him playfully. "We'll give him a small," Vijayan tried to bring about a compromise. But I put my foot down—there were lines to be drawn, as part of the duties of an elder brother.

Vijayan was at first not very keen on going on the trek. He insisted that he had been to so many forests, game sanctuaries and Tiger Reserves that he had lost count and this one didn't particularly interest him. He was more interested in going for the boat-cruise in the reservoir and sighting wild-animals and birds from the safety of the boat. However, I insisted that a trip to the hill-temple was the 'hip' thing. That film icons like Shivaji Ganeshan, MGR and lately Amitabh Bachhan, Rajni Kanth and Kamal Haasan had been to the summit. That did him in. I had this much in mind—let him have it for springing a surprise visit on us! And I too had not been to the hill-temple. I was more than excited.

It was against this background that the three of us set out for the thirteen-kilometre-trek to the hill temple. 'Hill' is a euphemism for that three-thousand feet rock-and-jungle prominence with an ancient ruined temple on top. For about half the way, there was a jeep-road. After that it was a trail up-hill also motorable as Maruti Gypsys of the Forest Department would now and then scale those heights near to the summit.

I put on khaki shorts and a camouflage outfit, and wore a matching cap. I also had a green-white-and black back-pack, which contained our packed breakfast and lunch, some plantains and a big flask of water. All this gear I had secured from a foreign junkie who was dying for a fix and didn't have the money. I knew that to walk in the jungle, one must wear appropriate clothes that didn't attract the attention of animals like elephants, gaur, deer or the elusive tiger. Khaki, olive-green or mud-coloured clothes were ideal. Trekking in the jungle was my passion, shunning even movies and booze parties colleagues invited me to on weekends and holidays. One of the most fortunate things that happened to me upon settling down in the township was that I chanced to befriend many of the Mannar and Paliar tribesmen who lived in the nearby reserve and worked as trackers with the Wildlife Department; with them I roamed the nooks and corners of the wildlife sanctuary learning from them jungle lore.

Hari wore mud-brown trousers and a faded-green T-shirt. Vijayan, who was supposed to have traversed all kinds of jungles, wore a pair of plain brick-red trousers and a white T-shirt. I objected to his wearing white, which is the most offensive colour in a jungle. I offered him my clothes—but they were ill-fitting. What an ass he was, he who bragged about trekking in forests for so many years, and an army man at that!

As soon as we turned the bend towards the hill-temple road, Vijayan began to unpack the bundle of his bravado. Typical army-gasbag, my cousin, I was beginning to feel. He held forth on how once, he, singlehandedly, shot down twenty-two Pakistani infiltrators across the LOC in Jammu & Kashmir. "Make it two Viju, cut out the twenty," I bargained. He hesitated and said, "May be one or two less, but definitely about twenty." I didn't quote any lower, lest our trip would be spoiled.

Then he said how they would go out into the forest hunting wild-boar and deer for meat, while posted in the forest-lined borders in the North-East. I said even thinking about a gun was forbidden in this wildlife sanctuary. But he went on, nevertheless, describing in great detail how he had faced tigers, bear, elephants and gaur in the forests and held his own largely due to his prowess with the gun and a little tact.

'Hssssss…' something brown-black flashed across the road. Viju who was leading, uttered a blood-curdling cry and leapt backward. We were walking in single-file as we should in the jungle, and I was bringing up the rear, keeping the kid in between. "It's only a mongoose, my brave cousin," I jeered. "It's all right; I just wanted to scare it away," he said. "Making a virtue of his fall, the shameless lout," I said to myself.

A kilometre ahead, I caught the scent of elephants downwind, which meant, they would be above us beyond the road, up the grassy slope. The sun was up for about two-span-lengths in the sky. It was growing warmer by the minute, and they would be on their way down to the inlet of the reservoir far below that shone like molten silver. It was likely to be a sizeable herd with big, old mamma-cows who usually led the group, young adult males, young-lady cows, and children. Sure enough, the cackling cries of young ones were heard from close proximity. Big tuskers had become a rarity. Poachers had mercilessly shot down any male who dared to show his teeth out. A witty seasoned tracker would crack a stock joke when guiding foreign tourists—pointing to tuskless cow-elephants he would say, "These are the tuskers. But they are all hiding their tusks inside their jowls for fear of getting shot!" He would also pass off a faraway rock-formation for an elephant standing still, if there were no elephants to be found, and he had to ensure his tips. He would be brutally honest even in that: pointing, he would say, "rock elephant," making it sounding like, "look, elephant!"

Presently, the herd came into full view as we turned the bend, spread out in a crescent-shaped formation, the ends bend forward. It was a large herd, at least 25 to 30 of them. Suddenly, Viju ducked down, crept backwards and came behind me. "Suppose they decide to charge, or something," he croaked by way of an explanation. The big idiot with a handle-bar moustache! "So, let my kid-brother have it, is that it?" I overtook Hari and led the expedition. In a way that was the proper thing to do with wild elephants ahead of us. I was wearing khaki, whereas my worthy cousin with years of army experience in jungles was wearing a white T-shirt!

I shooed our little party to a halt. Signalled them to be quiet. We were downwind. That meant the elephants would not get our smell even from a metre ahead. If we didn't make a sound, the herd would remain undisturbed. We waited with bated breath.

Fortunately, thirst had overtaken the elephants. As the nearest watering-hole was the inlet of the reservoir at least seven kilometres away, they had to make it fast. The great female pachyderm, obviously the leader of the herd, partly sat and partly slid down a rather steep gravelly slope leading down to the road, landed there safely, stood erect, fanned her ears like open parachutes three times vigorously, stopped them dead-still in mid-swing and stood cockily. She remained in that stance for full five minutes and then gave a peculiar call—like that of a raw bamboo stem splitting from head to foot in one giant wrench.

That was the signal for the group indicating an "all clear". Soon, she slid down below the road, and the entire herd followed her in single file. Within ten minutes, the road was clear.

Looking back, I saw Viju crouching behind a stone; I was shocked and ashamed to see a sight! The front of his trousers was wet! For the first time I felt angry with myself. Why did I push this trip down this mustached cry-baby's throat? I wondered. Hari was in stark contrast to this one. He was indeed proving himself to be a man. He was definitely not afraid; he walked abreast with me, observing the laws of the jungle.

Further ahead, I spotted fresh bear-droppings on the road. I explained it to Hari, while Viju whispered from behind, "Make sure the bear is not around." "Don't worry," I consoled him, "It is at least a day old."

All the while, I was on the lookout for tiger pug-marks in the fine mud deposited in tiny pools where water had been, during rains. Hoof-prints of wild-boar, stray domestic cows, deer etc were there aplenty. But no tiger had passed that way in the near past.

Two porcupines shot out from the burrow formed in the thickly-growing grass on the left. They scurried down-slope without even bothering to throw a side glance. But I did glance back. And Viju was standing rooted to the spot, like a hare caught in the headlights of a car at night.

Ahead was a clump of trees, an extension of a part of the shola forest that nestled between two grassy hills joining together, that formed a narrow valley in between. The tall trees were mostly benteak, one or two semuls, copal trees, mesua, a couple of wild sagos, and bishopwood trees. The shorter ones were mainly of the terminalia family. The undergrowth on the roadside where it was free from the overhead canopy of the combined tree-foliage largely consisted of a mixture of eupatorium and lantana bushes, thickly bound together with tall elephant grass and lemon grass. Exactly where the two hillsides joined, a small brook had originated and coursed downwards in rainy season; now its bed lay bare, filled with white quartz-sand, boarded by fancy-shaped boulders. There was an inviting glade beneath the tree-cover, further upstream. An ideal picnic spot! We decided to halt there for our breakfast. It was nearly nine o'clock.

We sat down to a well-earned rest after nearly three hours of walk—it would be inaccurate to describe it a walk, because we were rather sauntering, looking at things around and chatting. It would actually have taken less than two hours. Opening the packet of idlis we ate like underfed children, because walking in the wild gives you unexpected appetite. I took out the water flask. Viju drank the most. I admonished him. "Don't drink too much water; you won't be able to walk much if you do. Drink in sips." He didn't seem to heed. "What kind of a soldier is he? So inexperienced in the ways of life in the open," I said to myself.

We heard a strange sound from overhead, as if a jet plane was flying low. Looking up, we saw something like a small fighter-plane—it was the great Indian hornbill in flight! Following that, there was a commotion from the tree-tops—a colony of Nilgiri black langurs were shrieking and dashing away for dear life. I immediately guessed the reason—there could be a lion-tailed macaque somewhere around. And sure enough there were two members of the near-extinct species, immediately overhead—husband and wife, obviously. From a lesser height, sitting on a Teminalia branch, a Malabar giant squirrel quizzically regarded the goings on. As we got up to leave, a flying squirrel glided down-slope in a long, slanting trajectory, much like a mini-parachute!

We had sighted so many animals and birds today! It was indeed a very lucky day. Looking down at the road, I saw a giant monitor lizard dragging its body in an almost zigzag fashion across the road. It was indeed an auspicious sign for greater luck.

Resuming the journey, we began the real climb; the tree-patch was far behind and both sides of the path (the road had come to an end at the glade) were covered with thick tall elephant grass. As we were climbing higher, a species of rhododendron was spotted to the right of the road. As I stopped for a moment to look at the rare red flowers, and the cream-yellow of the orchid that flowered in the tree's fork, there was a flash of tawny-orange and black stripes with a touch of white below—I froze on the spot, realization dawning on me like a shock from low-voltage electricity. I had just sighted a tiger! Thousands of tourists went back empty-handed yearly without seeing what I saw. Tiger-sightings were really few and far between. One or two in as many years! I looked to my right where Hari was; he too had seen the sight and was standing motionless in all reverence. Only Viju kept on in a plaintive tone: "What happened? What happened?" He would have shat in his pants if he had seen what we saw. So I said, "We'll tell you when we reach back home."

We reached the summit around noon, after an uneventful walk of about two more hours. The temple ruins were majestic. Giant stone pillars, figures of makaras, yakshas, dwarapalakas, and idols of Ganesh, the Goddess and Shivalingams lay broken and scattered, obviously the result of some earthquake centuries back. However, stone-walls of the temple were standing in patches on two sides. The plinth of the structure was largely undisturbed. Wheeling around, Viju exclaimed, "Look there!" Looking down we saw, as if from an aeroplane, through thin haze, the sizzling red and brown ploughed up fields of Tamil Nadu, enclosed in square green patches of palm-lined hedges. The vista stretched as far as the eye could see.

We sat down to our lunch in the shade of a tree that grew within the precincts. Eating the packed rice and string-bean fry, we licked our fingers. The food was clearly not enough to satisfy our hunger. We were truly famished after this long trek. "Drink the water sparingly," I called out as I passed the flask.

Viju took a swig, Hari drank a little, and kept the flask down, seeing Viju pulling out his camera. I was sitting a little down-slope, and I felt my thigh getting suddenly wet. Looking up I saw to my horror that the flask which Hari had forgotten to cork up in excitement, was lying on its side, almost the entire water having flown out. Viju had knocked it down, stylishly moving forward framing fancy shots!

The gravity of the situation immediately sunk into me. We had the return journey ahead of us. It was but noon. No one could walk down the five kilometres of the open grassland in the midday sun. We had to wait it out until it was at least four o'clock. I picked up the flask and looked inside. There was barely two-three ounces of water left.

Viju and I already had the pangs of dehydration from emptying a full bottle of brandy between ourselves the previous night. What were we to do?

Hari spotted something very exciting far down the western slope. It was a rock-face slanting away, on which a milk-white patch shone! A crystal-clear brook, running down the hillside. We were enthused beyond words. In a mad scramble, we slid down the grassy slope, and kept moving further down, only to see the rock recede still further away. By some quirk of vision, the rock had seemed near; it was in fact double the distance, or so we thought.

Reaching the rock, our disappointment knew no bounds. What we took for a brook was in fact the moss-covered rocky bed of a dry brook. The dry moss had looked white in the sun!

Climbing all the way up back to the temple was the hardest task of all now. Viju kept complaining, "I had told you earlier on, let's turn back, let's turn back! Who would listen! We didn't have to come for this goddamn trek in the first place! Didn't I say we need go only for the boat-cruise? You wouldn't listen. It was your idea! Now, we've had it! After escaping the bullets of the *jihadis* and the spears of the *Nagas*, it's my lot to die here in this godforsaken jungle, of thirst, of all things!"

I shouted him down with a fierce expletive and told Hari to lookout for a kumbi tree. Fortunately I had remembered to carry a long knife in my back-pack as I always did while out in the jungle. Soon Hari spotted a kumbi tree. Chopping the bark nearer the base, I sank the knife deep into tree. Sure enough, water began to trickle down the gash. Thrusting a broad glass-blade into it, I prepared a sort of conduit for the water. While the trickle lasted, Viju first, then Hari and I tried to wet our mouths. We had kept the flask back at the temple-site, forgetting to pick it up in our mad rush!

We somehow dragged ourselves to the temple-site in about two hours and collapsed on the floor. Lying there face up looking blankly into the sky I guessed that now it would be nearing three o'clock. In a flash, I remembered something—tourists had told me that there was a sort of temple-pond, a little-way down the eastern slope. I told Hari about it and the next instant he was up and away in a blur. I followed him, and we found the pond about fifty feet down-slope—a puddle of green water in which tourists had deposited empty water bottles, beer bottles and refuse. But it was water! With deep self-deprecation, I picked up an empty plastic bottle and filled it with that highly polluted water. Reaching back, we saw Viju lifting his head expectantly and putting it down dejected, almost immediately.

We too sat down near him looking searchingly at each others' face. I was just about to suggest that we could now leave and slowly work our way down although the sun would be at its hottest around three o'clock, striking directly on our face as we climbed down. It was then that I heard what I thought was the rather loud snoring of a man, coming from behind the southern wall. Rising to my feet, pricking my ears to make sure it was not the soft beginnings of a tiger's growl, I moved cautiously to the spot we heard the noise from.

Turning round the end of the wall, what I saw was a most pathetic sight. A half-naked white man with tattoos all over his chest, abdomen, thighs and arms, was lying on his back. Foam was coming out of the side of his mouth. He was dying of thirst. Obviously a drug-addict, he must have had trip after trip in the serene solitude of the temple precincts, and used up his supply of water in the phenomenal dehydration that follows drug-abuse. Seeing me he showed a sign with his thumb, towards his mouth—for a drink of water! Viju and Hari had followed me and were standing over the man now. Hari dashed away to fetch the flask in which there was just a little water left. Viju too followed him.

Both returned soon—Hari with the flask and Viju with the bottle of polluted water. He raced ahead of Hari, knelt down before the dying man and offered him the polluted water before Hari could draw near, saying cajolingly: "It is very nice water, drink it!" The man looked into Viju's eyes with feeble, yet flaming eyes. Coming from behind, Hari gave a mighty kick to Viju's hand, sending the bottle a good fifteen feet skyward. In the force of the kick, Viju toppled over and began weeping like a child. It was such a horrible sight! The ends of his handle-bar moustache shaking uncontrollably as he sobbed.

Hari slowly poured the pure water from the flask into the white man's mouth. Soon, the comforting 'gluck-gluck' of him gulping down water could be heard.

I was moved with a strange compassion for my cousin. "Why are you so insecure and afraid? For a soldier like you, braving battlefields in different terrains, such adventures should be mere child's-play!"

Out came the truth: "I am merely a wireless operator, and have served mostly in headquarters due to the goodwill of a number of Malayalee officers."

A search party of foreigners who hired a jeep from the township, arrived presently and picked up the junkie. As we sat in the back of the jeep, jammed in between hefty Germans, he, lying on the floor of the jeep, turned a grateful glance towards Hari's young face. Hari most certainly had a clear line of moustache now!

Entries

Abdul Bismillah

It was not actually a diary but was used as one. A diary, which I occasionally received in the form of a gift during new years' time, was usually attractive, marked with a number of New Years' mentioned on its front page. The following inner pages would carry mailing matter, a list of entire year's holidays and a few important particulars were also published. But this one contained nothing as such. If truth be told, it was merely a thick notebook in the guise of a diary and as I have mentioned, it was also used as a diary. Hence I will call it a diary exclusively, no matter what others wish to pronounce it as.

I began to turn over its pages. Two pages were blank. On the third one, towards the right-hand side, was a date and beneath it was written—

'A flower bloomed in our flower-pot today.' I turned over the page. The next page revealed—

'I went to the *cutcherry* today concerning an important task. I climbed up to thirty six steps there and then down the same.'

In the course of paging through the diary and examining the postscripts registered on its pages, I traced the contours of a person's face on one of them. Short height. Dark complexion. Lean and skinny built. Long-faced. Head with close-cropped hair. A body eternally furnished in a coat, trouser and a tie. But if scrutinized carefully, both the coat and the trousers were of cotton. Despite ironing, creases were quite prominent. A very untidy knot of the tie. Once, a bedbug was also found walking out of it. It transpired that he was not aware of the business of fastening a tie knot. Gets them fastened from the shops purchased from. Then it remained so, in the same condition, till the end of its epoch. It was also known that shoes of his foot size were not obtainable in the market, shoes meant for children were sometimes externally formed to give an adult mean foot length, if available in the market;

they would do the needful. Once in a while when exposed his feet out of the shoes, it became widespread that the socks reached only above the ankle, the soles of the feet had nearly ripped for good.

He was a teacher of Economics. Perhaps not surprisingly, his all-inclusive affairs functioned in accordance with his philosophy of Economics. By looking at his so-called diary, it had been discovered that he would draw up a budget for each month and manage his salary accordingly. Income and expenditure owned a remarkable balance in his life. Several pages of the diary were solely brimming with descriptions pertaining to domestic expenses. Itemized from things like corn, rice, pulses, milk, soap and vegetables; to the movies shown to the kids, were all registered in a deep scientific manner. A random page would furnish the record of reduced quantity of milk, and the other would specify cut-back expenses of the movies. In some places, the afternoon tea had been struck off and the accounts of the washer man was brought down in some. Conforming to the theory of Economics, initial preferences were set for essential necessities and later for recreational goods. Luxury requisites were absent from the very beginning.

In the name of luxurious necessities, his personal expenditure was exclusively limited to just one thing. That was the expense of cigarettes. After each period, habitually, he would squat down on some chair in the staff room and leave for the next period, instantly, after puffing a cigarette. He had made arrangements for this approach in the manner, that he would leave a period earlier than three to four minutes and reach for the next period late by three to four minutes. In other words, he used to spend his eight to seven minutes, midway, smoking a cigarette. Since all day long he had to smoke a great deal of them, he would only purchase the cheapest cigarette available in the market. He was not accustomed to smoking any particular brand as such. As inflation reached newer heights and none of the cigarettes in the market remained low-priced; he launched into dividing the most reliable of all the cigarettes into two equal parts and thus began to puff the lone cigarette in the chain of two. Moreover, he had stopped having his recess tea during those days.

He was a teacher of Economics but, nevertheless, held considerable interest in English language and literature. Perhaps that is why, he always taught a period on English grammar. Over and above that, he would also pen down a 'Letter to the Editor' of an English newspaper quite consistently. He was certain that the Editor would someday ask him for a contribution of an English article etcetera, and this would fetch him not just hard cash but also esteem his presence in the realm of journalism. But his belief never came to fruition.

He had married quite late, that being so the children were too young. Both were boys. They were much alike their parents, slender and infirmly ribbed, who invariably fell sick. When he got tired of settling up with the doctors' fees, he brought into being his self-acquired medical practice. Bought a book on homeopathy and kept a handful of medicines. He had managed to procure a home-bred remedy this way. An exposition of the treatments that were put into practice, by him, was also unveiled in a couple of pages. Written on one page was:

'Gave *Ipecac– 30* to wife today.' Another page made a note of –

'Gave *Belladonna* to the younger one. Over the past few days, his eyes displayed a shade of cerise. The pain is minimal now.'

His house was at a great distance from his school. He had, therefore, kept a *moped*. That he had acquired through second-hand means. The *moped* would stop working, for about two to three times, nearly every day. But he was never late in reaching the school. Be it a tropical storm or gust of a cold wave, he would make it to the school at precisely quarter to ten. If ever the *moped* stopped running halfway down the passage, he would leave it in a repairing shop and take a *rickshaw*. Or at times turned up walking out of breath. Knowing not what calamity may befall en route, ergo he stepped out of the house with a calculated margin of an hour.

He barely took days off from work. But he had never been absent without having applied for a leave beforehand, from the school. It was before he had got married that his aged mother used to stay with him. Suddenly one night she passed away. Since no student of that area studied in his school, whom could he send to request for the leave? He locked the house and made it to the school grounds at nine-thirty. A page in the diary read— 'Whether in life, our honesty may render little chance of succour for us; it will, needless to say, contribute for others at least.'

For who is righteous and who is not, is onerous to say. People can have disparate views about him when placed close to each other. But fact of the matter was that he had never tricked a person out of a single penny. Moreover, favours owed to one; were returned with gratitude. During the recess, nearly all the teachers of the school used to walk out, in groups of three to four, to have their afternoon tea. But every time, he would go to the tea stall all by himself. Along with the tea he would pick up a biscuit, dip it in and swallow the mouthful. Besides, he gulped down the last of his tea. If ever any of his colleagues resolutely dogged him to have tea with them, at that point he would go with ease to have a cup; but the very next day took him to treat with one. These occurrences were such that his associates used to find him an eccentric, pinch penny and what not. A few teachers, who spoke straight from the shoulder, also chided him at times. Similarly, a teacher had once rebuked him for an incident and had said—

'Such a person should be shot dead'. But the following day, he reached out an arm to his shoulder and spoke—

'Did you feel aggrieved about yesterday's episode buddy? I hope you have pardoned me now for the same.'

But incidents as such were not mentioned anywhere in the diary. A few more defining characteristics could have been mentioned in his approbation. But, for now, it seems more salient to state that he has passed away.

His demise came about in the school itself. That day he had taught two periods in a row. Later on, came to the staffroom and crouched down on a chair after having placed the chalk and the duster in one direction. He took out a cigarette from his pocket, cleft it into two, then set alight one piece and started puffing it at a leisurely pace. Then all of a sudden he gave a short cough and tumbled down the chair, coughing and spluttering. A hubbub rose in the school. The principal called for the doctor. The doctor pronounced him dead. The school called it a day, the students left. A couple of teachers had necessary engagements, hence they also proceeded. The ones left in the school were merely— the peon, two or three teachers, the principal and his corpse.

The principal had requested the school's managing director to send over his car, so that his corpse could be taken to his residence. But coincidently, the driver was on a leave that day. A peon had, then, manhandled his own cot somehow. The other brought a cerement. This way his body, shrouded, was laid down on the cot and carried to his place; set on shoulders. Once they reached, it was discerned that principal sir went astray.

His funeral rites were performed on the same evening, where in attendance was not just the entire neighbourhood but a horde of other people from the town.

Ruminating, I turned over the next page of his diary. It read—

'If only! A man could catch a glimpse of people mourning for him, succeeding his death.'

And right below this, was written—

'Had to bring a tonic for wife today, couldn't bring it. She is vexed.

Come what may, whether I do or do not have faith in anything; I have supreme faith in my students. A little less than absolute, but I have faith in my colleagues as well. I am certain, that of all the people the ones whom I have taught are going to weep the most; with whom I have spent a substantial slice of my life.'

I petered out at that moment. Something else was written further down, the following pages must have been marked down with something or other, but I closed the diary.

Translated by Shirin Bismillah *from the Hindi original*, "Indiraj," *Rashtriya Sahara.*

❑

Death

Himanshi Shelat

In a bid to cover herself, she hurriedly made an effort to pull out a part of her sari from the fitted rod, but all of it came into her hands. She tied her hair neatly with a pin and while doing all this, did not even bother to look at the person who had been lying next to her in bed all this while. Neither was she in the habit of doing so. While concentrating on fixing up the *pallu* of her sari, she, by chance, happened to cast a glance at him. It was only then that she noticed his heavy irregular breath. It struck her as something unusual. Why... only half an hour ago he was absolutely fine; his satisfaction reaching its maximum peak as his heart throbbed rapidly with excitement. But the pace of his breath was quite unnatural now and the pupil of his eyes seemed fixed. Panic struck, she quickly came near the bed and as she was about to touch him, she saw him gasping for breath. Some strange sound came out of his mouth along with a lot of froth. His eyes appeared restless. Gulab panicked and her loud shriek attracted the attention of all the residents of the *chali*. Everyone came out, fearing some strange unnatural incident. The curtains of the neighbouring rooms drew apart, doors went ajar as the *mausi*, hand on her hips, rushed into Gulab's room. Along with her barged in the other women too – Mumtaz, Shanno, Sunita and others.

"Hai Ram! Why did you scream so loudly?"

"What happened?"

But even before Gulab could answer them, the others too joined in the shriek as soon as they saw the still, lifeless body. Everyone was pale with fear.

"Will you stop screaming? Let us see." A couple of elderly women came near the bed. They were about to check his heartbeat, but refrained from the act as his still, motionless eyes told them everything.

"Oh God! Looks like he is dead... What to do now?"

Gradually a big crowd gathered outside and questions were hurled at Gulab from all directions by residents in different tongues of Hindi, Gujarati and Marathi....where did he come from? Do you know his name? If he looked unwell, you should have refused him then and there. Please call someone.... What will happen now? In the middle of all this commotion, Gulab stood dumbstruck. She was clueless about this client. Just by chance such an untoward incident had occurred, otherwise who cares about such details of customers.

The *mausi* hesitantly checked the shirt pocket of the lifeless body. What else could she do? Sometime later Rafiq and Bahadur arrived, pushing aside the assembled crowd.

"*Saala*, came here to die! Let us see if we can find his name or any identification mark."

But they were unable to find any other clue; only a small key, some money and the photograph of a boy of two or three.

"May be he belonged to some respectable family," said Rafiq. He seemed to be right and this could be made out from his appearance and clothes.

"At least he didn't look a truck driver...."

"The fellow mentioned that he lived nearby, so maybe he lived in the same street."

"That is all okay, but how the hell are we to know where he lived?"

"Forget it. No need to poke our nose into such matter. Let us report to the police. They will come and take his body."

Mausi then, in an authoritative tone asked Jaggu to inform the police.

Gulab listlessly looked at the inert body. She could not come to terms with the fact that he is no more. She reflected on how the same still hands only a short while ago had held her in a firm clasp. How was it possible?... so suddenly? It was as if someone had cut off the lights in the flicker of a moment. Hardly had Gulab seen any death in her life-span of twenty five years. She had received the news of her father's death one and a half years after the event through a man who hailed from her village. She didn't even know if her mother was dead or living. She had two younger brothers and a sister, about her age with whom she always used to fight. Who knows where they all are now? She had never had a chance to witness the death of any near and dear ones. One or two in the neighbourhood had actually died but only in hospital, after prolonged and intense pain and suffering.

How can one die so suddenly? Only a few moments ago the heart beat was rapid and then abruptly it had stopped.

Gulab could not come out of her trance-like state. Deep within, she was scared to death at the sheer suddenness of the event.

At this moment a voice was heard – "Gulab, give way. *Saab*, please come, the body is here."

The police officer could easily be identified by his khaki uniform; a stark contrast to the bright and colourful saris of the women in the *kholi* – magenta, red, saffron, yellow etc.

"Who was this man? With whom was he? Did he say anything?" questioned the officer.

In a quivering voice, Gulab answered whatever she knew.

"Hey! What did you do to speed up his death?" commented a man winking his eyes while munching on *paan masala*. But nobody laughed. The dead body was carefully brought out of the room.

"Got to take him to the Civil Hospital. What about his family?"

"Who cares? Perhaps will come here to shed tears."

"A lesson for all time's sake. No matter whatever *lafda* you do, keep your identity card with you. The bastard died and landed us in trouble."

All the lanes and by-lanes were crowded with people. An unidentified body was on its way. Everybody was dumbstruck, none were crying but an uncanny silence descended upon the neighbourhood. All curious passersby were standing in the lane. Some were peeping in to figure out if they could somehow identify the body.

"His wife may not be aware what the guy had been up to and how he conked out."

"Ya! May be she was waiting for him on the doorsteps of his home. How will she know about his wicked ways?"

"Leave all this. The dead never returns. We are alive at least. No one knows whether he died with any grief in his heart."

"Doesn't look like it. Earlier he had come here, not to me but to Munni. But she is not around so whom should we ask?" inquired one of the inmates.

"He was quite stout and healthy, not emaciated or sickly"

In the meantime a vegetable vendor with vegetables on a pushcart and a fishmonger with a basket of fish entered the lane. Little by little, the crowd dispersed. Smell of kerosene and smoke filled the air. As the dead body was taken away, life returned to normalcy. The lanes and by-lanes once again became alive with the cluttering sounds of vessels, the strong smell of seasoning and the noise of kids running here and there. Only Gulab could not come out of her trance like state for the next couple of days. The cold lifeless body lying on the bed haunted her day and night.

As Gulab was sitting on the portico of her *kholi* on the fifth day, two women with their faces covered, approached her. Pointing to the other woman, one of them said, "Her husband had come here and died about five days ago."

"So what?" retorted Gulab.

She was taken aback by the sudden turn of events. She now recalled how Shammo and Sunita always used to say how people who came here always concealed their identity, though the inmates of the *kholi* did everything openly. The men who enter this *kholi* are also ashamed of revealing their identity.

But these two women were quite different in their demeanour. They dared to come there openly for inquiry. Till now Gulab was alone, but as the women in the *chali* saw strangers approaching, they surrounded Gulab to show solidarity. The two women who had arrived sometime back seemed to be in a hurry to speak out.

"We have not come here to create a racket, but only for some inquiry."

Mausi came out and interrupted quite defensively.

"He had come here like other customers, but unfortunately died. Now what can we do?"

One of the women while fixing up her *pallu*, said, "Perhaps this was our destiny, but we have come here for a different reason altogether. Please listen to me carefully."

"My husband had gone to my brother's place to collect Rs.1000, which was a share in our ancestral property."

"She was supposed to go and collect the money but as their child was sick, he went alone," said the lady accompanying her. She further clarified, "When he did not come back home, we went to the police station. From there we got the news of his death. We thought if we could find any document or letter he left with you...May be nothing of this sort happened, but even if you knew something, how would you contact us? The police only directed us here."

"How am I to know?" retorted Gulab. "He gave me only Rs. 50 in advance and the police may have handed you his wallet."

"But we found nothing in his wallet. I am not on good terms with my own family and they have cut off all relations with me. How do I survive with a child?" said the hapless wife.

Gulab couldn't understand what to answer. The assembled crowd were silent. Today Gulab's long-cherished views of married women leading comfortable lives, gently sailing happily on a swing were shattered. She realised that the lady in front of her was also treading on equally unsteady grounds.

Suddenly remembering something, Gulab stood up. She removed the curtain from the shelf of her wall, picked a packet of cigarette and handed over to the lady saying, "He had kept it on the table immediately after he came to the room. It has been lying there since then. I had forgotten to give it to the police among all this chaos."

The wife took the pack and felt its smooth surface with her tender touch. She pressed Gulab's palms and hands softly while taking it. And then she went down the stairs somewhat hesitantly.

While going down the portico, Gulab noticed the woman's eyes quickly scanning inside the room. For a little while, her gaze settled on the bed as if looking for someone.

The wife then went out into the lane and looked back from around the corner. Gulab was standing near the door and once the lady reached the main roads, she mingled with the crowd and vanished.

Now Gulab went into her room and in her imagination saw the man gasping for breath, his pupils moving about unnaturally. Gulab shut her eyes with the palm of her hands and opened them again. She saw only darkness all around.

She had changed the bed sheet and swore never to use it again. She was about to sit on the bed, but then squatted on the floor with her legs spread out, leaning against its frame. She was not ready to entertain any customer today and bending down, dropped her face in the fold of her knees.

Translated by Nandini Bhadra *and* Pratixa Parekh *from Gujarati original,* "Maut," *Sanjno Samay*, 2002.

❑

Epilogue

Devendra Choubey

> There are some stories in which characters and locations seem to bear resemblance to real life. Many readers considering them to be real, start comparing them with the facets of day-to-day life, whereas these are not real, only a kind of illusion. The real pleasure of the story can be tasted by disentangling oneself from such illusions. The tales which I am going to recount here can be traced back to those times when independent India was caught in the tussle for borders the second time. But you will hardly find any mention of those events in these stories.

The Arrival of the Nepali in the Village

Near the southwestern Buxar town of Bihar there is a small village named Ahiroli. You might have come across this name. The name of this town and village are inscribed in *Puranas* and histories as *Vyaghrasar* and *Ahilyavali* respectively. The ancient story is a bit interesting so I will narrate it in brief and move on to the main story. It is mentioned in the *Puranas* that when the demons started disrupting the sacred religious rituals of the sages and hermits, the sons of the king of Ayodhya—Ram and Lakshman, went to Chitravan to demolish the demons like Tadaka. Some researchers of contemporary times believe that these demons were none other than the Buddisht preachers who stayed in the forests and were annihilated by the Hindu kings. Today this place can still be located in Buxar. Later on, when the two brothers accompanied their teacher Vasistha in his journey towards north-eastern Janakpur, they had come across Ahalya in the form of a stone statue. It is believed that Ram had freed her from the curse. The people of the Ahir community who resided in this area were named after this Ahalya by the local populace and were addressed as 'Ahalyavali ke Ahir'. Later on both the names were assimilated and the village became famous as Ahiroli in contemporary Bihar. True to its name, this village has a significant number of Ahir population. But during the medieval times as the story of Ahalya spread across the entire region, many Brahmins started pouring in, and there arrived a time when this village, consisting of Ahir and Brahmin population, eventually started developing into a religious center. During this period two merchants of Buxar, Ghattu and Bhola Sahu, built a temple of mother Ahalya to express their devotion. As a result, every year, in the month of November after Dipawali, a number of devotees started visiting the place. Later on, this occasion became famous as 'Panchkoshi Mela'. The second major contributing factor for the development of this village as a religious center was its location on the banks of river Ganga, a fact that is reiterated by the elderly stalwarts of this village like Chandrama Chaturvedi, Ramayan Chaturvedi, Ramraj Ahir, Suraj Sahu, Chintamani Chaturvedi, Sumiran Sahu, Gopal Ahir, Dinanath Chaturvedi, Babuaram Chaturvedi, Lakshman Karmakar, Sanyasi Baba et al. Many of these stalwarts are now no longer among us, but their names are mentioned in village every now and then and the current generation proudly remembers them.

I have gone into all these details because during those days when the village had started developing as a religious center, almost around the same time an incident took place. A hermit arrived from some place and begged land from the villagers and started constructing a temple-monastery in the western part of the village. The temple-monastery of the village exists since those times and as far as my memory can trace back this has been the center of all the religious activities in the region.

The morning and evening prayers that were carried out in the temple-monastery acted as magic for the villagers. After the evening prayers the village boys instead of studying marched straight towards home for food. By the time the morning prayer took place villagers invariably reached their work place after having taken their bath. Within a short while the temple-monastery expanded its control over the life and activities of the village.

A few years after this, another incident took place that shook everyone in the village. After the classes got over, we were coming back from the school of the temple-monastery. Probably I was in fourth standard and Chiller was in third. He was somewhat naughty by nature. We saw a boy sitting on the terrace of the temple of 'Ahalya Mata' with a white cotton cloth wrapped around him. His face had pockmarks and his body was naked. He had a broad and flat nose and the cheeks were hallowed, but he had long ears. It was believed that people with long ears are very fortunate. His lips were also red and beautiful. But his beautiful face had withered away because of hunger and thirst. His body was stout and his complexion was so fair that we were struck in astonishment.

"Seems like he is an Englishman..." While we were still staring, Chiller had climbed over the terrace and was sniffing at the boy's nose and face and was shouting, "Get down, bastard!" Hokhal, who was in my class, came from behind and rebuked him loudly, "Why are you taking your face that close? Can't you see the nose is flat and broad? Must be from the hills, bastard! Come down, if you touch you might get poisoned and be dead!"

By now many boys had gathered around us. Numerous speculations were going on. Gradually the sound of our conversation increased, yet the boy was still lying silently.

"Are you Goddman dead?" Chiller tried to climb the terrace again and just then Hokhal stopped him by pulling his pants and dragging him towards himself.

"Will you shut up or not?" Then staring at him said, "Seems like he is famished. Might not have had any food."

Just then two or three elderly women hawkers of vegetables passing by the scene came enquiring, "What happened?" "What happened?" Taking some water out of a jug they sprinkled it on him and asked brusquely, "Who are you?"

Rubbing his eyes he gradually woke up, "Nepali".

"Nepali?" we were all left stunned.

"Goddamn! Have you come all this way on foot? That's why you lost consciousness?" Chiller was shocked, "No bedding, no food. No cycle, no bullock cart. Then how did you come?" Hearing his reasoning and seeing the fellow in a mess like that we all laughed.

"Shut up!" the women shouted. "Can't you see he is lying here on an empty stomach."

"Yes!" Now he sat up. Hearing his reply we became quiet.

"Really? By walking?" We could not believe him. Everyone was suddenly silent! Shocked!

"Here, drink some water!" One of the vegetable-hawkers handed him the remaining water in the jug. He drank it all in one go.

"Get up, come with us." They supported him and brought him down from the terrace. When she was trying to pull him up he found it difficult to get to his feet. With a lot of difficulty she took him with her. Next day we heard that Nepali was accompanying those hawker women to Buxar to sell vegetables.

The Stealing of Watermelon from the Bank of the Ganges and the Nepali

That day was 26th January. Me, Chiller, Hokhal, Tulsi, Lakshman, Bechan, Gudli, Birender and all had reached the river bank much before sunrise. Otherwise, everyday we arrived a bit late; by that time the peepal tree of Naya Ghat is bright with the sun and the dusty path lightens up. From one side people and the washer men's donkeys get down from the slope to enter the water, and from the other side we boys run at such a speed that we almost fly across the uneven road of the bank and, throwing the clean clothes on the ground which are to be worn after bath, we jump into the water. After that it was a competition among us to swim to the farthest point. During winters when the sand increased on the bank, our roads were stretched a bit further.

That day when we reached the riverbank screaming and jumping, while on our daily routine, our eyes were tantalized by the fresh green water melon patch. No one was around the river bank. Dark and light green watermelons were lying on the sand. Everyone's eyes shifted towards the small scaffoldings where the watchman used to rest. But our noises did not bring any movement in them. What else then, we all jumped in to the field. Each started plucking whatever half ripe big-small water melons he got and ran towards the water. Then we all ate the melons. Here we were eating the melons and God knows when the Nepali arrived and was standing behind our backs.

"Hey you?" Chiller was surprised, "Where did you land from at such an early hour?" He stood silently.

"Go away, bastard!" Tulsi shouted at him raising his voice.

"Why did you all destroy the crop? Mother Surati will beat me..." We realised his precarious position on hearing his tearful voice.

"So, do you stay here?" I beckoned him towards me. "Listen, you stop working here. And why are you crying?" Then patting his back I told him, "Today you come to school with us."

"She will beat me!"

"How can she beat you?" This time Chiller supported him. Nepali was happy. Happily he bathed in the Ganges with us. But he didn't go to the deep waters. Mine and Hokhal's house was nearby. We took him to our place. Then someone gave him a vest, someone gave him a shirt, someone a pair of pants and someone else gave him his old slippers. And this way, on that day of 26th January he went to school with us wearing a shirt torn at the collar and tucked inside a half pant, and heard the speech of Prabhunath Master who was repeatedly shouting the slogan, "Jai Jawan! Jai Kishan!" After that he saluted in attention and stood at ease in front of the tricolour. When his lose pant would slip he would adjust it with both his hands and in the process Nepali ended up doing stand-at-ease instead of attention and vice-versa. Then taking sweets he came back to the village with us.

Then? Till evening he kept playing with us. When darkness started descending we all got a bit worried. We just could not figure out where to keep him and by that time Surati reached our house looking for him. My father and uncle had gone out somewhere. Scolding, she started to take him with her. Nepali's happy face had turned tearful now. We felt very helpless. Just then I rushed towards him and told him everything from the other side Kariman Gaud came. "Hey stop!" On hearing his thundering voice the lady stopped. "Hey you..." he looked at Nepali, "...come here." Then pointing towards his house he said, "Go, sit inside the house!" After that he magically reddened his eyes and glaring at the lady said, "Got a free servant or what, woman? Go away from here! Or else I will inform the police and get you so many shoe-slaps that your skin will melt!"

He had scared the lady so pitifully by mentioning my grandfather's name that she left immediately murmuring something. I was proud of Kariman Gaud.

The Illness of Lakshmi Pandit and Arrival of the Nepali in Temple-Monastery

Kariman Gaud's house was right in front of my courtyard. After having his evening meal, Nepali came to our courtyard. I arranged a bed for him right next to me. Then he started telling me various incidents from his past: Once his father had come to Patna, when his mother was alive. It was because of her illness that he left the job with the Patna contractor and started drinking heavily after returning to his village. After his mother's death his father married the same woman who sold liquor. While conversing we lost track of time and did not realise how dark it had become.

When my father came back from the fields at night he was surprised to see the new boy and asked, "Who is he?"

"Nepali!" he shot back even before I could, "Walked down all the way from Janakpur to Sitamadhi, and then took a bus to Hajipur. From there walked to Patna, then to Buxar with the TTE. From here I will return to Janakpur on foot." He was narrating everything in such a manner as if it was some happy news.

"Goddamn, why walk?" Father was surprised, he was not much interested in Nepali's journey on foot, "Don't you have parents?"

"No," he started off again, "Mother died. Father remarried. The second mother had an alcohol shop. She would make me work there till late night. If some customer abused or beat her, then she would beat me. Father never protested. So I ran away."

Just then my uncle arrived. After that they both started talking to each other. In their discussion they were repeatedly referring to the temple-monastery. I could not follow much, but it seemed from their conversation that the Chief Priest of the temple-monastery Lakshmi Pandit was seriously ill and was concerned about his successor.

"No, he won't make Durgadutt his successor," Uncle said, "last time he sold the mangoes of the temple-monastery to Lady Surati without informing him. He also has other bad habits."

"But still," Father was explaining to him, "he is from our village. If he becomes the Chief Priest then it will be for the benefit of the village. Otherwise the head priest will arrive from Banaras and declare some Bihari priest as the successor of Lakshmi Pandit. Poor Babua Ram's son Prabhunath master will lose his job."

"But villagers won't agree to this and why should Prabhunath lose his job?" his voice was rising. Suddenly his eyes caught the attention of Nepali, but he didn't say anything. He just kept on staring at his face in the darkness. Maybe Kariman had told him.

After talking about nothing specific for sometime he went home to have food. "Are you asleep?" I asked Nepali after Uncle left, "Why do you want to walk down to Janakpur?"

"Because Lord Ram also walked down from Buxar to Janakpur to marry Sita. I will also follow the same route which he had along with his teacher, guru Vasisth." He was awake and his voice was full of freshness and excitement.

"About whom were these people talking?" God knows why but I suddenly got irritated on hearing Nepali's voice.

"How does that matter?"

"Why? Is the temple-monastery's chief priest going to die?" without paying heed to my irritated tone he asked again.

"Will you sleep or not?"

This time he did not say anything. May be he sensed my anger.

At that time I could not understand him, but the events that followed later made him the hero of our village.

I have no idea when Father and Uncle returned to the courtyard at night. When I woke up in the morning I found my adjacent bed empty and the sunrays were just reaching me after being sieved through the neem tree. Uncle was not there and Father was brushing his teeth with a neem twig.

"Where did Nepali go, Father?" I asked rubbing my eyes. I was feeling a bit empty from inside on not finding him.

"He left at dark with Kariman to collect leaves from the garden." Father replied while rinsing his mouth.

"Collect leaves? Why?"

"To light the hearth." Father was getting ready for somewhere. And really, when I reached the garden of Bengali mother I saw both Nepali and Kariman collecting and storing the leaves.

"Why have you come here?" I was out of breath, "Don't you want to go to school?"

"School?" Nepali was a bit taken aback. Kariman had reached the other end of the garden, gathering leaves. Just then Uncle was seen returning from the fields. "Uncle! Uncle!" I was scared that Nepali might just go away with Kariman like he had left with the lady. I could not explain to myself how within a day I had got so attached to him.

"What happened?" Uncle asked, as he drew nearer. Kariman had probably not seen us.

"Get him admitted to school with me please!" on hearing my plea Uncle's face glowed.

"Will you study?" he asked looking at Nepali. "Till which class have you studied in Nepal?"

"Two." He was standing silently. As of now we did not even know his name.

"Come!" Uncle instructed.

After that he came to the courtyard with us. Then, after taking a quick bath, he went to school with me. We sat on the same mat. Holkar, Chiller, Tulsi, Gudli and others were surprised to see him.

Squinting his eyes at Tulsi, Chiller said sarcastically, "God damn! Now Nepali will also study?" Nepali remained silent.

Our classes were held inside the premises of the temple-monastery, under a few big mango trees. Prabhunath master's chair was placed under the densest shade of the tree and he would sit on it with his legs folded; and sitting there he taught us multiples-tables, Hindi—and all other subjects.

Uncle came to our courtyard with one of the priests from the monastery who invariably paid a visit to our courtyard. God knows what conversation took place between them and our teacher but then I saw Nepali's name being registered in master Prabhunath's register. Then Uncle called for me and Nepali.

"After the classes, take him to the priest's place in the temple-monastery. From now on Nepali will stay in the monastery." His words hit me like my heart was being hammered. I only nodded my head in silence. I had bought this upon myself. Uncle left with the priest. The teacher was making the students mug up the multiples-tables. Coming back quietly we sat on our mats and started parroting the multiples-tables.

Nepali Being posted as a New Priest and My Trip to the City

When the classes got over, I had escorted Nepali to the temple-monastery. At that time the noon prayers were going on. Then the offerings to Lord Ram were made. And whosoever was present there had a meal of the offerings.

Nepali was bewildered. The priest had seen us approaching. He took Nepali away with him through the inner door. I kept looking at him sadly as he moved away. But I could see a strange shine in his eyes.

When I finally reached the village with tired feet, I was very upset. That day I could not concentrate on anything. In the evening I did not even feel like going to the riverside where we played kabaddi everyday. At night when I heard the prayers of the temple-monastery Nepali's face appeared in front of my eyes—now he would be ringing the bells in the shrine. After that offerings will be made to gods. Then all the people of the shrine will sit together squatting on the ground and eat. Where will he sleep? Suddenly this question troubled me, but what could I do! The road connecting the temple-monastery and the village was very deserted. There was a big garden of mango and guava in the middle of the road, which also had two-three palm trees. The villagers firmly believed that in the last three-four years all the people who were victims of unnatural deaths now stayed in this garden as ghosts. Yes, people believed that the neem tree that stood near the temple-monastery also sheltered Lord Hanuman. Even my granny told us that once during midnight when she was going towards the temple-monastery to offer prayers, Lord Hanuman, tall like a palm tree, blocked her way and said, "Old mother, where are you headed to at such a late hour? Lord Ram would be sleeping now. Go, go back to your place!" That's why even when we go that side we run through the garden patch and take rest near the neem tree—"There is nothing to fear now! If a ghost does come near us then Lord Hanuman will thrash him and drive him away."

In the midst of my thoughts I did not realise when my eyes had closed. When I reached school the next day and saw Nepali it did not seem as if this was the same guy who was one day found unconscious wearing only a loin cloth in the Ahalya temple. He had a sparkling white dhoti, yellow turmeric paste on the chest and sandalwood paste on his forehead. He came and sat beside me quietly. Hokhal, Tulsi, Chillar-everyone was stunned to see him. I was glad that he sat beside me. We sat in silence for sometime. I could not decide what to ask him.

"Did you get food at night?" I ended up, unable to say anything else.

"Yes." His reply was brief.

"Where did you sleep?"

"The room adjacent to the priest's room. All alone."

"Did you participate in the prayers and rituals?"

"Yes!" His replies appeared serious, "Today morning after bath I only assisted the priest in performing the rituals before Lord Ram. After that the priest took me to the Chief Priest. He touched my forehead and blessed me." He was unable to speak further.

"Ok! Yes..." by then the teacher had arrived, "We will talk later."

I could not speak to him any more that day. As soon as the school got over around noon he left for the temple-monastery. He told me while leaving, "I have to reach before the prayers. The priest has instructed specifically."

The next day also he left in hurry. Now his face carried a special kind of glow. He had started liking the monastery.

"Do you perform prayer rituals?" one day he asked me suddenly, "Now I know many verses in Sanskrit. The priest was suggesting that in a few days time I could start performing sacred rituals."

"I do, but I don't feel like. I don't know why but I find all these rituals worthless." I replied with disinterest, "If I don't light the incense stick everyday then my granny scolds me. But I like only Lord Hanuman a little bit."

"Why?" he asked me in surprise.

"Because he is full of power and he helps everyone. He had once saved Kariman Gaud from the spirit that resides in the banyan tree."

"But he is a follower of Lord Ram," there was a hint of pride in his face, "and I pray to Lord Ram."

"So what? My Lord Hanuman helps everyone." I did not like his words, "All the boys of *ahir* and *machua* clan of our village pray to Lord Hanuman and practice wrestling. Many of these *ahirs* are my grandpa's friends. Ramraj is the closest."

He kept thinking silently for a while. Before he could say something I asked him, "Why do you perform rituals for Lord Ram?"

"Because...," he stopped before completing.

"Yes, tell me, why?

"Because of..." he looked around him, then brought his face near my left ear and whispered, "Because the priest says if I learn all the religious verses by heart then he will make me the Chief Priest of the temple-monastery like Chief Priest Lakshmi. Everyone will respect me. I don't have to work anymore. I have only to give sermons for sometime everyday and I will get good food and clothes. Your Uncle comes to the monastery everyday to consume marijuana and explains all these things to me..." he stopped for a moment to breathe, "...and now I don't have to go back to Nepal! Neither do I have to sell liquor in my mother's shop nor do I have to tolerate misbehavior from the customers." He suddenly stopped in the midst of his monologue. Teacher Prabhunath was taking his seat.

I could not speak to him after that. After classes he left for the monastery in a hurry just like yesterday. In this fashion, he would arrive early to school, speak to me for long, speak about the monastery and leave as soon as the school got over. The only thing that hurt me the most was his informing me about my uncle's addiction to marijuana. Time passed by. I passed my fourth grade and moved to the government school. Nepali stayed behind. Now I met him once in a while near the river bank. And thus I met him one day.

That day I was running towards the river to take a bath. Nepali was coming from the river carrying water in a pot of bell metal. He stopped on seeing me, "Where were you all these days?"

"Father is back from the town," I was in a hurry, "he was insisting I should accompany him to the town and study in an English medium school."

"Really?" His face fell. We were about to part when he suddenly remembered something, "You know," he lashed left and right, "Priest Lakshmi is going to part with his mortal body this evening. The Sarpanch, village head and other important people from your village will come. But before he departs he will announce the name of the new Chief Priest."

"Really!" I could not believe how someone could leave his own body, "Can I come there too?"

"Don't know!" he prepared to leave, "Come to the temple-monastery today evening or tomorrow around this time. I will tell you everything in detail then."

He left, putting me in a dilemma. On the other hand, when I arrived home after bath, my granny, aunty and mother were all talking about the monastery. Mother informed me that Father had made reservations for day after to leave for the town. That meant I was in the village for only two more days. After that I could not stay at home.

I rushed to the courtyard. There I found Father, Uncle and Chandrama's father, all discussing the monastery. Uncle was excited.

"Let me see, who can stop me?" saying this he prepared to leave. Everyone was trying to make him understand. Kariman Gaud was smoking tobacco sitting infront of his house, as if events of the village did not matter to him.

In the evening there was a lot of chaos in the temple-monastery. Only senior and elderly people were present there. Some people wanted to see Durgadutt as the successor to priest Lakshmi but the village head and the sarpanch were not ready for this.

"Anybody but him…" the village head had insisted, "I will not speak evil. But his intensions are also bad."

These words silenced everyone.

Whom priest Lakshmi declared as his successor, how he parted with his body—I could not get to know, but when I woke up in the morning I saw Uncle was very happy. I ran towards the river.

Mathiyava Ghat carried a different look. Nepali was taking a bath surrounded by priests. Everyone was moving in and around him. After bath, when they were taking him towards the monastery, our eyes met. He winked at me with his right eye.

I could not understand what had happened after all.

After I reached home I learnt that, yesterday before parting priest Lakshmi had declared eleven year old Nepali as his successor. Today in the monastery at eleven he will be placed on the throne in the presence of the villagers and the head priest who has arrived from Banaras.

Granny had taken me to the monastery as well. Sitting on the throne Nepali was accepting everyone's reverences. I went near him with Granny, bowed my head and looked at him. But this time his eyes were still, as if made of stone. Sitting silently, holding the scared book with both his hands he placed it on the head of the devotees, and then with a small bronze spoon distributed the sacred Ganges water as a sign of blessing and sacrament.

The very next day I left for town, with Mother and Father, where I was admitted in the fifth grade. After this we did not go to the village for a long time. Even when I went I could not meet Nepali. After finishing my schooling I left for another town to pursue my college degree, which was far from my village. There I came across a completely new world. If on one hand there were the activities of the college and university, then on the other there were the activities of the progressive writers, where we eventually got lost in the worlds of Premchand, Gorky, Lu Shun, Renu, Pablo Neruda, Nirala et al. Gradually Nepali got erased from my memory and I got involved in processions and seminars.

My Last Meeting with Nepali

I was probably about to submit my Ph.D thesis when I got the news of my grandfather passing away. I could not visit my village immediately, but when I reached, apart from the ceremonial feast all the other rituals were over. The entire ritual was performed at my uncle's courtyard. Just a few days ago he had constructed this house next to the temple-monastery.

That day our entire time was spent in supervising the feast, which was meant for the villagers and relatives. I was very tired. Strolling around I reached the river bank where the cool breeze provided me with some respite. The bank was completely desolated. The peepal tree had also been uprooted in the last year's flood. Some people were having tea and tobacco at Lakshman Mallah's tea stall. Wandering I reached the bank of Mathiaba.

I was just about to move towards the river when I saw Nepali approaching. He was escorted by two other priests. He was surprised to see me standing right in front of him. The sun was about to set. The sun rays were gradually fading into the flowing water of the Ganges.

"You?" he signaled the other priests to move ahead, "When did you arrive, Mr. Nirmal? Your uncle told me you had not come..."

"Yes, I arrived today."

I was clueless as what to say. Suddenly I remembered something, "I had heard you had left for Nepal."

"Yes, I had gone."

We started walking towards the western direction. He said, "I had received the news that my father was no more and I was also fed up of my role here. I thought I will settle down in Nepal and cure people through Ayurveda."

"Ayurveda!" I was surprised, "How did you suddenly develop a interest in that?"

"Just like that!" His face was getting tensed, "One can say a lot of things but its better not to."

We both remained silent for a while. I was just staring at Nepali's face, "What happened?"

"Nothing."

After remaining quite for sometime whatever he said was a new experience for me. "Even after becoming the Chief Priest I continued with my studies. Everything else was looked after by the priest. Your uncle had started visiting the monastery more often. Whatever he asked me to do I continued doing. Can't talk about everything I have done."

He had thinned down, "But I did not leave my studies. I could not attend the school for higher classes, but there was a student here who was the main inspiration behind my interest in Ayurveda."

"But this is so great!" We had walked a long way by then.

During our return, whatever Nepali told me only strengthened my belief system.

"A few years after becoming the Chief Priest the realization dawned on me that all these things were futile. After all we just need inner peace. For that why do we need such elaboration? Why such fraud? In this life of offerings and rituals we all fool each other. All!" His voice was rising, "People visit temples only to cleanse themselves of the black money they possess. Have you ever asked a poor man or a labourer why doesn't he visit the temple everyday? Why doesn't he give donations? After working for the whole day, when he is tired, he sings prayers for his peace. He sings hymns, but for that he doesn't go to any monastery or temple. That is refreshing and rejuvenating for his body and soul. The priest of the temple or monastery is only a medium to cleanse them who pretend to occupy socially significant positions. Since ages these important people make common people like us occupy the chair and keep fooling each other. I can tell from my experience of last 26/27 years that we have lost a lot of our time and money in these useless activities."

His tensed face was gradually getting relaxed. Along with its rays the sun had now immersed itself completely into the river. The crowd near the river was increasing. Continuing, he went on, "I can tell clearly that distributing Ayurvedic medicine has brought me more peace of mind than sitting on the chair of the chief priest. When a patient is cured of his disease from my medicine I feel as if my hard work and prayers are appreciated." Nepali's face looked absolutely calm now, "I have handed over the entire administrative responsibility of the monastery to Durgadutt. Now I only distribute medicines to the patients and devotees of the temple-monastery and practice yoga in the morning hours. This gives me peace."

We were nearing the monastery. We bade each other good bye. For a long while I kept looked on as he was going towards the monastery. I never met him after that.

Translated by Khusi Pattanayak *from the Hindi original*, "Uttarkatha," *India Today*, 1999.

□

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Shaguna Gahilote

A month back she had taken the shot for renewal of her age-defyingness. She would have now been 969 and she felt like Methuselah, the biblical prophet. She was happy, not only had she been successful in living on for so long, she had also managed to look 46. Age defying medicine had worked for her, her gamble paid off; after all she was one of the first few people who had taken the risk. Today she wasn't the oldest but surely among the revered class. And the officials had informed them that certain bodies would not be able to accept as many shots but hers surely did and so did that of another 50-odd people.

She was proud for she had been clever enough to recognize the potential of this medicine early. Today everybody who reached 40 starts taking the dose. Deaths only happen in accidents. It was strange though because these days everybody looked 40 and there was no variety at all. No young ones, no more old people just a good mediocre 40.

Marriages no longer are barred by age; in fact it's not a consideration at all. There have been several incidents flashed by journalists, of couples getting married and after years of marriage realizing that the couple were born 400 years apart. The government it is heard is planning to have the REC (rays examinable code) made compulsory for marriage. The population is under control now, with each person being allowed to have only one child ever in his/her life-time. The second only acceptable if the first dies. And yes it has been reported that certain step-moms and step-fathers have tried to kill their step-children in order to have their own. This 'child's' factor however has clouded over all other consideration in marriage but has been useful in keeping population under check.

Maotose has three children though. She had them much before the medicine was discovered. Today they all look the same, she, her three children, her five step sons and daughters and four husbands. In fact one of her daughter last year got married to her step daughter's father-in-law. There had been a lot of hue-and-cry around that time. Christmas is still dreaded because of that incident.

She however is closest to her son Tsching. It has little to do with the fact that he is her only son and more with the fact that it's a son that a mother is closest to. Five husbands down and she is yet to find her soul mate, her son though is one who comes closest to being so. Her two other daughters, always find themselves at logger-heads with their mother.

Life in these 969 years has been full of bitter sweet memories. But it has continued to look up, so much so that she has continued to live this long now.

Today is her birthday when she officially turns 969 and she is getting ready for the party. All her near-dear ones, the ones who make the greatest difference will be present today. Her son is especially coming down from Moon to attend the party. And for the first time in all these years, her 34 grandchildren, 25 great grandchildren and 21 great great grandchildren, all will be present.

She is excited about the party but has no one to share her excitement with. None of her extended family lives with her any more. And most of them are crossing continents to be with her here today.

She had bought a red chiffon dress for the evening, only because it matched with the red silk scarf that her first husband had gifted her. It was the only dress material that had survived. It was her most cherished item and from the man whom she hadn't stopped loving even some 941 years later. Science had not developed any medicine to bring back the dead or found answers to where they went. Tsching had taken a lot after his father. He had not just inherited the looks but also his mannerisms and she was often saddened at the choice of his girlfriends and wives. 'There isn't one,' she thought, 'who could understand him and love him the way he deserves.'

She remembered to put a couple of drops in her drink for refurbishment, it would keep her 'alive and kicking' till the wee hours of the party, so that she could enjoy and remember every bit of it.

Flowers had already started to pour in and the phone never stopped ringing, it almost seemed that the whole world was her family by the sheer number of phone-calls.

Guests had started transporting themselves since afternoon just to prevent the MTM (man transporting machine) from breaking down.

The venue had been arranged by Richard (her step - grandson), 'The Downs' a large ground converted into a vintage village, just like her own, where she was born.

The evening turned into night, guests continued to descend, and so did the gifts. All in one way or the other addressing the very life that she wished to forget that night. The toast also mentioned the one name that she had been so missing since morning, 'Rana'.

And the only one face, whose one hug could drown it all, was still to appear.

Tsching hadn't called up all morning, she had consoled herself with the explanation that he was on his way, in fact the last time she had spoken to him was before he was to start for home.

The night continued to reveal faces blinking from her childhood, the village fair, her first boyfriend, her sister on the tree-house, her mother behind the kitchen counter, her father baking her 5th birthday cake, Rana lounging on the sofa. Tsching's first independent cycle ride, his first born - his lovely daughter Sarah in her arms, all pink and cuddly.

And in the crowd were faces which had a history of memories. Helmut her great grandson who had grown up in her house. Left by his parent with her when he was a couple of months old and who had only left when he was 21 and that too was forced on him. Neil her younger sister's husband who'd survived due to medication. Her only so called first family alive. Shafiq her son-in-law who would always be home to lend a hand at the household chores, also the only person her daughter was slapped for dating asked her out. David the little toddler who'd recently started walking.

She glanced through the happy faces in the crowd and was reassured of the reason for her choice to live this long. Except for the one cheerful face that has actually kept her alive – Tsching.

At 11:45 pm when she could not take it any more, she declared her 'not cutting the cake till Tsching appeared' and her tone was all serious. It was followed by a long drawn silence. Till somebody came up and whispered in her ear, Tsching had committed suicide by taking excess of Menophilli dosage.

❑

The Lotus and the Moon

Parvathi Ramkumar

It was a gibbous moon that shone silver over the war camp, marking the bustle of warriors and their ken, the swift, silent movements of messengers, the whicker of horses too restless and hot – blooded to remain quiet. Plumes of smoke from bonfires rose in supplication to the stars, woodsmoke scented with incense. Abhimanyu stepped out into the night and inhaled, for the heat of battle still surged hot in his blood, and he perceived, albeit dimly, the blinking lights of the enemy camp in the hills. The tent behind him had none of the comforts of home, for this was war, and comfort did not trail in the wake of battle.

And yet, with the strike of steel and shield, with each passing day, the end was near. He knew it. Abhimanyu looked up at the moon, watching the stream of moonbeams, how they grew brighter with his gaze. He knew then that the moon was watching, and waiting, for his return. For though in mortal form he was one man's son, in spirit he was, and would remain, the child of the moon. A son the moon was loathe to cleave from his side, and yet had done so, for a very short time.

Yes, he knew.

"We will see the Padmavyuha on the morrow," said a quiet voice behind him. Abhimanyu turned slightly, and bowed to his uncle Yudhishtira.

"I gathered such," he said, smiling grimly. "They are not holding up well, our cousins the Kauravas."

"It… is a difficult choice of strategy, the Padmavyuha," Yudhishtira admitted. "If I gauge correctly, it will be their attempt to lure me into its depths." He eased the armoured cufflink on his right hand, watching as the light from the bonfire sparkled on the golden surface. He looked at Abhimanyu. The tall young man, with his chiselled features and glittering eyes, stood with a confidence that belied his sixteen years.

The very moon bathed him in its glow, marking him in its preference. For all that had transpired in days of battle, Abhimanyu was still largely untouched by wound or trauma. The young man's gait was still as graceful as a dancer's, his laugh still rang through the camp.

Yudhishtira sighed. If only Abhimanyu's father Arjuna were here, his next words could be spoken with less…guilt.

"Was there something you needed me to do, my Uncle?" Abhimanyu asked, as if reading the other's thoughts. "Please, do not hesitate. Ask, and it will be done."

☆ ☆ ☆ ☆

Duryodhana poured over the diagram, sharp eyes tracing the lotus – spiral of the Padmavyuha. As a formation, it was sound; his own senses whirled with the labyrinthine loops and swirls of the formation. He ignored the throb of a tightly bound wound on his legs. That would heal. His pride, however, had taken a beating, and his hopes of winning this war were thinning rapidly. Outside the main camp, he heard the jangle of repairs, the trot of the war horses and the calls of messengers. Turning slightly, he gazed at the open flap of the tent and paused. A moonbeam struck the entrance, as searing as a flame, yet cold. As he watched, the beam scattered to a thousand tiny sparkles and vanished.

He sighed, turned back to the table with the diagram, and took a deep draught from the nearest cup, wincing slightly at the medicinal, bitter brew. There had been signs, far too many, and he had learnt to ignore them. Some of them lent the troops courage. Some, like the mysterious moonbeam, were more confusing. For what interest did the Moon God have in the battle between the Pandavas and Kauravas?

"My lord," he said, addressing the tall and muscular figure opposite, "Is this wise?"

The other stretched and straightened, fingers drumming a tattoo over the table with the drawing. Battle hardened and shrewd, Dronacharya was more than just a teacher. When he spoke, men listened. And Duryodhana listened now, watching the silver haired man indicate the Padmavyuha with a jewelled dagger.

"We seek to draw Yudhishtira to the core," he said, in a deep voice that, despite the heavy beatings the Kauravas had taken, was calm.

"I would rather draw Arjuna into it," Duryodhana interjected with a smile. "But alas. Our most *feared* enemy fights in another part of the field."

Drona lifted a brow, appraising his once student. "You forget that Arjuna also knows his way out of the Padmavyuha."

"I remember," Duryodhana said. "How can I forget that man can do anything? Behold the very skies that tremble at his mere glance! Beware the *maya* of his divine arrows that kill you before they're even fired!" He shook his head, frowned at Drona's half smile. "I am tired."

"Perhaps the war was unnecessary?"

"I merely said that I'm tired, my lord. Nothing else."

"It is also true that you may have underestimated your enemy." Before Duryodhana could retort, Drona held up a hand. "And I have a temporary solution for you. The Padmavyuha."

Duryodhana's dark eyes smouldered. "What do you propose?"

"We challenge Yudhishtira to enter the formation."

"I… see," Duryodhana said, apparently not seeing at all. He reached for the cup once more and found it empty. With a sudden movement, the man flung the cup to the far corner of the tent, where it smashed against the hard ground, shattering into pieces. He drew a deep breath, allowing his mind to refocus once more on the drawing of the Padmavyuha. But no… his thoughts were led astray. Images of battle and falling men obscured his concentration; sounds of death and the screams of the dying, the splatter of blood, the droning song of bowstrings. The hiss and clang of swords and maces. Defeat was far from his consciousness, but weariness had begun to seep into his dreams, weariness that was slowly, inevitably, moulding itself into despair. Such thoughts he could not afford, not now, when the entire fortune of the Kauravas was at stake.

"Come," Drona led him out of the camp, into the crisp air of the night outside. He indicated the field of stars that glowed in the sky. "Look."

He looked. Splashed across the heavens were faint images that resembled gods. They winked in and out, melding into the stars here, reappearing there. Soft, molten forms glided from constellations to the moon, and from there scattered like a sunburst. Despite the illusory sheen of the images a pale glimmer of celestial light encased them all. Duryodhana raised his brows.

"The gods are watching," he observed. "How quaint."

"Do they not always?" Drona sighed, still staring at the sky. "I do not know their will, but know this. Our fates in this war are our own."

"Woven into the Padmavyuha?"

Drona turned to him, the ghost of a smile marking his features. "We will issue a challenge. To Yudhishtira. But…" he put up a hand before

Duryodhana could speak, "he will not come, not directly. He will send another. A young man, sixteen years old."

Duryodhana said nothing.

"I see the outcome now, clear as daylight," Drona went on. "Abhimanyu does not know the way out of the Padmavyuha. His father does, yes. But *he* does not. His devotion and loyalty, however, will ensure that he does not refuse his uncle Yudhishtira's request." Drona shook his head. "He will be sent with others trailing him, waiting for his signal to breach the Padmavyuha. He will enter the formation, he knows how. *Yet he will not escape.*"

"He is very young, my lord," Duryodhana remarked, eyes still fixed on the dancing shadows of the sky.

"Do I hear admiration in your voice?"

"No. How can I admire he who slaughtered Kauravas and our allies?"

"Or more importantly, how can you admire Arjuna's son?"

Duryodhana laughed softly. "I concede, my lord. This is war, and I will take any opportunity I can get." He pressed his hand against his temples. "Though I wish we did not need to draw in a mere… child into the Padmavyuha. No matter how battle hardened and ruthless he may be."

"Blame not yourself, but the man who sends him there," Drona said, his voice barely above a whisper.

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Abhimanyu stared ahead, shielding his eyes from the flash of sunlight on armour and steel. His consciousness registered, barely, the flashing movements of war chariots, the thunderous cries of elephants, the clipping hooves of horses. Despite his racing heart, his thoughts were calm, his rationale calculating as he assessed the dazzling lotus – swirl of the Padmavyuha directly ahead. Men, Kauravas, moved in liquid unison, swords and breastplates glinting like molten fire. How well he recognized the pattern of the Padmavyuha, for had he not heard it, and learned how to enter it, from his mother's womb?

He held up his shield, still as undented as the day it was forged, blocking an onslaught of arrows, and began to move. To breach the Padmavyuha was a simple matter, knowledge he had carried with him from before his birth. He knew allies followed his trail, waiting for him to take the first plunge into the lotus – spiral. He knew they relied on him to find the breach in the formation and enter it. They would then follow him, and the battle would take a turn for the better. Yudhishtira had asked of him a favour of no small measure, and he had agreed, despite the gaps in his knowledge that meant he would be trapped in the Padmavyuha once he entered it, for if there was an exit, and undoubtedly there would be one, he would not recognize it.

He had not told his uncle this.

Arjuna, his father, would have prevented him, he knew this too. But Abhimanyu surged ahead, cutting down those who stood in his way. Arjuna fought far away and would not have returned in time. He would handle this, alone. A spurt of fear clasped his heart, and Abhimanyu smiled thinly. Fear was such a transient, illogical thing. He would not allow it to consume him, concentrating instead on the fires of rage, willing it to the forefront of his mind until it was more than a flame, it was a shimmering blaze. It quelled other feelings, and fear, defeated, shrank to the recesses of his being.

He entered the swirling Padmavyuha, following the twisting lines of warriors, blocking their thrusts and heavy blows, shielding himself against their frenzied strikes. He moved with them, dancing to their steps, felling them with each master stroke. And still they came, more and more of them, and as the spiral turned, Abhimanyu felt a knot of doubt. For each wave of fighter felled, another round came – deadlier than the last. For hours the youth fought, then felt a shadow cross the sun.

His allies, where were they? Even without looking back, Abhimanyu knew. They had fallen back, had lost his trail, and had not been able to follow.

Perhaps they had been stopped.

He was alone, surrounded by Kauravas. They grew stronger and stronger as he wound his way into the spiral, their strikes and parries deadlier.

Abhimanyu focused on the warriors ahead. The movement around him revealed a dizzying display of searing metal. Looking at it wrenched his mind from the present, and one misstep was enough. He was outnumbered.

Yet there was a lull in the fighting and Abhimanyu raised his head. His jaw tensed.

“Greetings to you, Abhimanyu,” said Duryodhana, and Abhimanyu saw movement as more Kauravas and their generals stepped into view. “It is a pity that you are here, alone. Jayadratha's competence ensured your Pandava allies could not follow you into the Padmavyuha.”

“A pity, my lord,” Abhimanyu said.

"A pity indeed," Duryodhana agreed, and Abhimanyu saw that the man did not smile. "It is... painful that my greetings to you are also my farewell."

Abhimanyu bowed, and raised his sword. "So be it, my lord."

In a battlefield too near and yet too far, a shadow fell over Arjuna's heart. He looked up at the sky, and from the glinting sunlight, knew in his heart that his greatest fear had come to pass.

"Ah Abhimanyu," he whispered, and wept.

❑

Palmful of Stars

Biyot Projna Tripathy

From homosexuality among senior students in the school to molestation by older relatives at home, I had seen it all in my childhood. I grew up with so much sexual abuse that by the time I reached my puberty I used to get furious at any kind of touch without my permission, be it a man or a woman.

The life cycle of humans is fixed like any other species of the world and I was no exception to it. But my life had many exceptions to the social norms. While in my final year of masters; I fell in love with an athlete of first year intermediate science. Normally in life, stories, novels and movies we hear about girls falling in love with boys who are equally if not more educated than them and of the same age group or a little older than them. The common norm also was that the boys are taller than the girls.

My love story was different. It had started from me getting mesmerised by the scent of his body when he was shooting baskets from the half court. The first sentence of the declaration of our love was also pronounced by me. He was not able to look straight into my eyes till a year of our acquaintance and he never touched me on his own. For these reasons I started liking him more.

Normally we used to meet in the basketball court. Sometimes both of us used to go for the afternoon show of the English movie, to the nearby cinema directly from the college by bunking classes, on our own bicycles. Usually I would watch the entire movie resting my head on his shoulder. Sometimes in between the movie, when he used to look at me quietly, his face would brighten up like a faint string of lightning. He used to always be extremely careful and respectful towards me while talking to or about me. In college nobody suspected of a relationship between us. To others it was nothing more than admiration, so there was no gossip about our friendship.

After my MA results, the day I was leaving for Delhi University for my M.Phil, while both of us were perhaps bidding good-bye to each other, sitting quietly in the players' gallery of the basketball court, he suddenly took both my palms on his hands and covered his face with them and started sobbing like a child. That was the first time in my life I felt like hugging someone tight without hatred, without annoyance. But I did not have the courage to do so in the middle of the basketball court in broad daylight. I just wept and wept, for not being able to hold somebody the way I wanted to for the first time in my life.

Just after my masters I shifted to Delhi and became busy with my higher education. He rang me in the hostel phone once in a while. Those were not the days of cell phones or internet. He used to write two to three letters every month. Whatever communication existed was all from his side. I wasn't able to give him much time. Hence not encouraged by my response, he also slowly stopped calling and writing to me. Dust had started accumulating over our relationship, which I never tried to wipe off.

Time flew by and so did life. After finishing my studies I joined Chandigarh University and thereafter left for Australia to do my PhD, after which I got married to my British tutor Gleen and started living there. The main reason of my getting attracted to my guide was that he was very sharp and knowledgeable, was always very impressed with my point of view, opinion and level of understanding. Other than those reasons the idea of marrying him was a very convenient and the most comfortable relationship for me. In short it was a marriage of convenience. Gleen was fifteen years older to me and his first marriage had broken six years ago. He had no children from his first marriage and by the time we met he was already a man of repute. We got a considerably good amount of time for courtship before marriage, the way it normally happened in their countries, in the west. During the first sexual encounter with him before marriage I kept my eyes closed the entire time. I really do not know why; because of being shy or scared or out of love. That very first time whatever he did to me, I liked everything about it, but we could not make love. I felt a lot of pain. Neither did he force himself on me nor did he ever feel bad about it. Rather he was happy that we could not make love at our first attempt and told me, "Above all, you are an Indian woman. Such kind of behaviour before marriage is against your social values. So it is best that we get married at the earliest." It happened so and we got married just after a month.

On the first night of our marriage, for the first time in my life without fear and hesitation, I saw a completely nude adult man. Gleen had a very proportionate and attractive body. Very masculine, no extra flesh, no paunch. He was standing two feet away from me, nude, smiling and asking me to remove my clothes.

Before this in my childhood two, three men, almost of Gleen's age, at different times did it partly opening my clothes or theirs. Almost all of them ejaculated while I was lying in front of them tiny, fragile, still a child, scared like a living dead. Those men in front of everyone used to get so irritated with me that when they abused me while we were alone, out of fear and hatred could never gather courage to protest. I used to simply close my eyes and pray to God in desperation, for their immediate death. At that point of time I didn't know if God was there or not, or whether he did understand my language at all. But none of them died; neither at that point of time nor till many years later. All of them were either my relatives or family friends.

When Gleen asked me to remove my clothes, rather tried to help me undress, suddenly all the faces of those men floated in front of me and with a mixed feeling of fear and deep hatred, I started puking. Seeing me like this Gleen became nervous. He gave me a glass of water and made me cool down, and he wore his night suit and came up to sleep beside me. This is how I spent my first night with my husband.

Gleen hugs me tight, kisses me hard, but has never tried to undress me after that evening. If my legs became bare anytime, while sleeping, he would cover them. After our first night he had consulted the best psychotherapist in Sydney. Gleen was behaving in such a manner with me heeding his advice.

With each passing day I used to love Gleen more and more. I felt very relieved that he would never try to remove my clothes again. Gleen's love for me was real and true in every sense. Within six months of our marriage I became totally comfortable with Gleen's body. I started hugging him and kissing him hard, off and on, could sleep carelessly with him and even come out of the bathroom nude in front of him. When all these things were happening in our lives Gleen suggested that we try to consummate our marriage with a hope of success this time. Both of us agreed. Both of us loved children, and to be able to have children, we needed to make love.

This time both of us got undressed. Gleen looked at my nude body without a blink and said, "How can woman be so beautiful! You are looking like the Hindu goddess who is out to kill; kill me forever." Then he stretched his hand to loosen my long beautiful hair, which was clipped. He slowly caressed my hair and gently pulled me towards him. On his broad and nude chest I felt warm and secure. While we clung to each other with love, our physical bodies caressed each other thoroughly. Suddenly I felt as if one of those men of my childhood was holding me tight. I opened my eyes in pain and fear. I pushed Gleen hard and freed myself from him and ran inside the toilet and started puking again.

This time Gleen got perturbed with my behavior. His ever smiling radiant face became dull and dim. Next evening, he suggested that we should visit a marriage counselor. The marriage counselor heard both of us and referred me to a psychiatrist. I started going to the psychiatrist once a week for two hours religiously. Almost after a month of visiting him I was able to talk about the events of my childhood as I clearly remembered all of it. After telling him those details, for the first time after twenty five years I felt light, truly light.

After hearing carefully everything I had to say, the doctor said, "These kinds of events are not uncommon. Many young boys and girls go through such kinds of abuse in their childhood mostly by elders known to them. Some forget it slowly thinking it to be a bad dream and cope with life at different levels, and for some it takes a little longer to erase it from their memory and be comfortable with their own body and mind. But there is nothing abnormal about it. Don't put any pressure on your mind. You had absolutely no control over those events. You are not responsible for what happened to you as a child. Those people were perverts. Do not feel angry but pity them instead. You should not have an iota of guilt for this. Read books on love and romance, go and watch romantic movies. Go for a vacation with your husband to your favorite destination."

Gleen and I went to Turkey for a vacation of two weeks. It was like a dream holiday. Both of us were so happy. We did everything from swimming to bungee jumping, to taking a hot balloon ride in Cappadocia, but failed at lovemaking. Despite all our efforts I could not become comfortable with Gleen's effort at lovemaking. After one and half years of our marriage Gleen and I finally got divorced with mutual consent on the ground that the marriage could not be consummated.

After getting separated from Gleen I did not want to be in Australia any longer. I came back to India, taking up a reader's job in the Central University of Hyderabad after two years of my divorce. Because of my interests in sports from my student days I accepted the responsibility as one of the advisors of the university sports advisory committee. The accumulated dust of the last fourteen years had suddenly started clearing up from my memory, of all those moments I spent at the basketball court and after so many years his face again became prominent. I wanted to know where he was, what he was doing, and how he looked now. In fact, wanted to know everything, everything about him. I tried to trace him, his whereabouts, but all in vain. He started coming to my mind more and more, each and every day. Our last meeting inside the basketball court when he put his face on my palms and started sobbing like a child. That very moment started haunting me again and again. I desperately wanted to see him just once. I thought to myself, "This time I will not let him go, I will hug him tight with all my energy, never to leave him." But things hardly happen according to ones wish in life.

After a PhD abroad, being an excellent teacher, having many international papers to my credit I had all the comfort of life but little peace. But after becoming the sports committee adviser I get a peculiar sense of contentment and mental stability. Almost every day after class I started going to the basketball court. Sometimes I used to take the ball from the students and dribble a little, then tried to basket from half court and many a times was able to do so. Students clapped at my success and I felt so complete at that moment. But my eyes searched for that very radiant face with a faint line of lightening. And my ears longed for that very feeble sound of a content smile. I felt restless. Unable to think a way to find him out, my nights became almost sleepless and days tiring and depressing. I just couldn't understand how to reach him, where to look for him.

At that point of time my university decided to host the inter university basketball championship. I got totally involved in it; both our girls and boys teams practiced a lot. The girl's team went up to the quarter finals and lost but the boy's team reached the finals.

It was a very exciting and thrilling final match. The ninety minutes game stretched to hundred twenty minutes and after giving a tough fight to the opponents our team lost the finals. I felt as if I had failed in my exam, as if I had lost the match.

After the game all players came and sat near me in the player's gallery. Our captain was looking pale in frustration. Seeing him so miserable I walked up to him. Just to console him I kept one hand softly on his shoulder and with the other hand tried to hold his right hand. He was sitting with his eyes closed as if he had been punished by a nursery teacher for excessive talking—angry, offended and devastated. He suddenly turned and took both my palms with his hands and covered his face and started sobbing the way someone had sobbed fourteen years ago. All his tears had flown in to my eyes through my palms. Looking at this, the rest of the team came near me and started crying in silence as if I was a sponge which would absorb all their tears, all their grief.

After that day it became almost a ritual with all the university athletes to come to me with any problem no matter how small or big it was. They poured their hearts out; they cried their hearts out in front of me. Their new tears would flow from my eyes becoming old and I felt as if I was breathing. My body and mind felt light. I am breathing only because he might come some day like these people and shed his tears through my eyes covering his face with my palms.

Translated by the Author *from the Odia original*, "Anjula," *Sambad.*

❑

AUTOBIOGRAPHY

Bandh-Anubandh

Kamal Padhye

Just a month after we decided to get married, Padhye wrote in one letter:

"R.B. Joshi has left for Delhi. His job will soon become permanent there. Obviously, the Joshi family will soon be leaving for Delhi. For almost three to three and a half years, I was living with them as part of the family. Now the family is about to distintegrate—even if it is for the good. If you had been here I would have been able to bear it with your help… the house where we lived with so much love and cooperation will soon disintegrate because the three people in it will be moving to three different directions. I am totally restless…"

With so much faith had Padhye written this letter to me!

Was my presence in his life proving to be inadequate for him to forget the disintegration of that house?

The days then acquired a stale and boring colour. Padhye got through the days with the help of his reading, his job and his friends… and me?

A girl who had skipped a year of college, distanced from her friends and classmates, distanced from her parental home, pressurized with the oppressive feeling that she was falling short somewhere, waiting endlessly in an empty house for Padhye to return… worried that he did not care for her feelings.

Something somewhere was getting discoloured, crumbling… but what? It was not clear. I was not even old enough to rationalize all this. For my young and tender emotions, the boundlessness of life and all were just words read in a book.

Padhye handed me the salary of March and said, "I am going out of town on the fourth. I have taken leave for one month."

My stressed out mind guessed a lot. Silently I packed his bag.

At the railway station, Padhye met some acquaintances and became absorbed in the conversation. The train arrived. Padhye got in... engrossed in chitchat about the whole world, he had completely forgotten about the wife, waving farewell to him. The friend-companion was completely incinerated. Alone she kept waving... that solitary farewell wave bequeathed a lifetime of loneliness.

I had returned to 'Kamlaram' even before I finished with my Intermediate Exams. The exams ended and so did college. Now there was nothing for me to do except wait till the results were declared. It was clear that this waiting would keep increasing my restlessness.

One day Padhye said to me, "Kamal, I'll rent a room for you. You stay there."

"And you?" I asked him in sudden apprehension.

"I'll visit you there of course," said Padhye.

I simply froze. What was the meaning of this strange proposition? 'Kamlaram' had no space for me. But to ask this question? To your own wife!

The sanctity of the house was completely destroyed.

I refused point blank.

What an insult it was to me! He finished the topic there. But the topic completely finished me. My complete failure lay in the fact that he felt like suggesting this. A home of one's own... this is a dream that every woman nurtures right from childhood. A home held together by the silken bonds of love, affection and emotions. A woman living in a room has, in the Indian context, the negative connotation of a 'kept' woman. The oppressive atmosphere in 'Kamlaram' was asphyxiating everybody. It was true that no one was able to breathe freely now. After the arrival of Padhye's wife, the previous dynamics of the household changed. Perhaps it had become unbearable for Padhye to bear the oppressiveness. But what does it signify when a man is not even able to fathom what he is suggesting!

The bee in the bonnet kept humming endlessly: why did Padhye ask this question?

I did not want a room. I wanted a home that was accommodated in the room. Padhye had erased my concept of 'ideal wife' from my mind and replaced it with the concept of 'companion wife'. But I got neither the house of the 'ideal wife' and the 'companion wife' of course was nowhere to be seen.

When I got married, there was a new kind of relationship that was making waves in the literary world—'soul mate'.

The bond of friendship is interconnected with several emotional ties, whatever level it may be. Why stick the label of 'soul' to it? And if friendship is an emotional need of humans then it should require no labels at all.

Is it because friendship between a man and a woman cannot be digested by society that such need for a label arises?

And what is the status of this 'friend'? We cannot choose the relationship of mother and sister—these are blood relationships. But 'wife' and 'friend' are relationships bound by emotional ties, ties that are chosen and not naturally given. In any case, an Indian woman has not been given the freedom by society to choose her husband or friend. In any case, all these bonds have the same kind of form—not accepting the ownership of anybody and yet needing the ownership of each other… the dialectics of life is tangled!

Second July 1940! The first anniversary of our meeting… the day began and started moving ahead drily. Padhye did not even remember it. But I was not prepared to bear it all alone at 'Kamlaram' and was not prepared to remind him about it and force a celebration either.

I just got up in the afternoon and headed to Hemrajwadi, to stay with Tarabai.

Padhye came the next day. "Lets go and buy a sari for you," he said. The saree was bought. "When are you coming home?" he asked. "Tomorrow," I said. Padhye left. But my emotions could not soften. Padhye though was completely shaken.

On the next anniversary, Padhye came with a bundle under his arm.

Two pretty calendars! Unrolled them before me...

The date underneath—Second July!

He asked, "Which one did you like? The one you choose, we'll hang in our room… and the other we'll hang in Sudhabai's room."

So the calendar of my choice was hung in my room and the other one in hers. She was at school at that time.

Remembering and forgetting had acquired so much meaning! I was moved.

When I came home the next day, the calendars had changed places… I looked at Padhye for a second and just disappeared from there before he could open his mouth.

I was too self-respecting—arrogant even—to hold him to account on this issue. I was tied up in the bonds of love. And I was not in a mood to expose my wounds to these bonds of love by putting forward my rightful ownership to a relationship.

It was a truth that could clearly be seen. I did not want any justification from Padhye. It would be a tame justification in any case.

This truth that was adhered to my existence hurt my ego. Wordlessly I tried to rationalize the whole situation.

I was torn by such incidents. What am I to this house—it was just not clear! The feeling of being an encroacher would come sometimes unexpectedly and sometimes deliberately. And then my mind and heart would just close. There was nobody to relieve me of it. And if even there had been, I doubt I would have opened up. After all how could I speak of my own humiliation? To talk to all and sundry of this strange dilemma in my married life did not fit into my idea of a cultured upbringing and would have demeaned me.

There was just one home which could possibly relieve me from this stress: the home of Dr. Chitnis—filled with happiness and playfulness.

One day I just landed up at their doorstep and untied my bundle of sorrow.

"Doctor, I'm feeling very lonely today… don't feel like going home."

Doctor Chitnis said, "You stay here today… we'll see what we can do!"

And so I did not return home that day.

Around two at night, the doorbell rang and I heard the doctor opening the door.

Padhye had come looking for me. R.B. Joshi was also with him. He had guessed where to look for me.

I could hear the conversation faintly. But I did not go out.

Doctor Chitnis said, "She is sleeping inside… will come in the morning."

Padhye had come. Come to take me home. The question of what to do next had solved itself.

The next day when I started for home, my heart was fluttering. The doctor said, "I have spoken to both of them. Everything will be okay. I know Padhye."

Who else was there to understand me? Padhye realized it and so came to fetch me. His wife had walked out of the house, why she had left… that too he understood. Even though he felt that I was not in the wrong, his pride was still injured.

When we two shifted to Parsi colony, the daily humiliation to my self-esteem was reduced. Padhye too was aware of the oppressiveness of 'Kamlaram'. It had become unbearable, yet the pull towards it continued. The embrace followed us to our house in Parsi Colony. After the incident of my going away to Dr. Chitnis' home, it reduced a bit but he continued to be deeply involved with the house. Whether it was our house in Shivaji Park, 'Kamlaram' or the house in Parsi Colony! He never said a word about it, never gave a justification and nor did I ask for it. As far as we were concerned, the topic was over.

I had realized that there are some things that just have to be understood... that are beyond discussion. Still... I felt like asking... "Why?" But I could not dare to do so. I managed to keep the relationship of husband and wife afloat but friendship could never be a part of this relationship again.

It is true that it is dangerous to look for answers to some questions. Yet my mind continued to think about the issue of friendship between husband and wife.

The isolation that arose out of it however, I could never forget.

I have immense respect for women who can live life without blinkers, who can lead life fearlessly without bothering about what others would say. I can understand the agony of women who have grown insecure in a culture that valorizes the fact that women should compromise, that women should be tolerant. But I can only pity the attitude of women who try to hide the inferiority complex arising out of their helplessness under the cover of tradition. It is unfortunate that society has this hypocritical attitude.

In this society the woman who tolerates injustice and calls it compromise for a happy family is called the ideal woman. How is it possible in such a society for true friendship to blossom between husband and wife?

There is a kind of razor sharpness to my personality... if I am not at fault it is difficult for me to compromise. Often this sharpness has hurt Padhye.

Once he had written in one of his letters, "You are very capable, very intelligent, whatever work you take on, you complete it with determination. But why don't you become a little tender? I have expected from you above all... tenderness (which my nature directly demands.)"

I was the wife of a creative man. It is generally difficult for a woman to handle this kind. My tender emotions had been trampled on very early in my marriage. Padhye too was not unaware of it. Those fissures that formed in the early days of my marriage never could be completely filled. There is a crucial time period for a husband and wife to understand each other. When that crucial time is gone, then even the awareness that something precious is lost cannot bring it back. All that is left is to bear it stoically.

It was true perhaps that I fell short in his expectations. It was difficult to fathom when and how his sensitive and vulnerable mind would get hurt. But then he would often forget to apply the same rules to me… forget to handle my emotions with care and delicacy.

Actually the husband-wife relationship demands more from the wife. It is these expectations that prove to be an obstacle in forming a pure friendship between husband and wife. And definitely they form an obstacle in bringing tenderness into the relationship. The raising of family that accompanies this relationship makes it so mechanical that it ends up making the partners dry towards each other. Then it is the loving bonds with the children that sustain this relationship. All actions take on a kind of mechanical regularity and even the touch of tenderness is lost.

Finally, a husband is a husband and a wife is a wife. This relationship cannot sustain friendship. Then this relationship becomes a burden. That is the tragedy of this relationship.

I first came to know him as Padhye's best friend. When he first came to Delhi, Padhye said, "Kamal, this is xxx. He will stay with us for two days."

I had heard Padhye mention this name very often. I had also read his book. Actually it was a technical book, but I was impressed more with the literary value of the book than anything else.

Of course, there was no shortage of topics for discussion over the dining table with him around. And this time it was the topic of sculpture. My main job whenever guests came over was to play the role of listener and to see to it that they were well fed.

This session too blossomed with humour, with intensity, with playfulness, with knowledge, with scholarship… and then suddenly he remarked, "Padhye, it is not just velvet smoothness but also roughness that one wants to touch and feel. When one sees stone sculptures, one is tempted to run one's hand over the whole sculpture."

This remark somehow remained in my mind.

Madhu brought a hot roti and he said 'no'.

I instantly remarked, "Do take… it's just a *phulka*… see how soft it is!"

He quickly turned to look at me… as though with fresh eyes.

Two days passed quickly and happily.

Later Padhye continued to talk about him… and an unnamed restlessness rose up in my heart.

Some time later he came to Delhi again. We had a Fiat car that time. I hardly allowed Padhye to drive the car. Braking violently and giving lurches to the car was his specialty. But I couldn't say this directly to him. So I used to say, "I love to drive." Prashant too used to say, "Dada, let Tai drive."

It wasn't just us but Padhye too who used to be tensed with his driving. So mostly it was me who did the driving.

Padhye was in office and Prashant was in school. It was just the two of us who were out on a joy ride.

I truly used to enjoy driving.

The long spacious roads of Delhi... edged sometimes by tall, green trees, sometimes by beautiful buildings, sometimes by big velvety lawns.

I was madly in love with speed.

The cosiness of a Delhi winter! Filling me up boundlessly!

And the car speeding, speeding.

He said suddenly, "Shall I tell you something?"

"Yes..." I said, drunk with speed.

"But don't tell Padhye."

"Okay... tell me."

"You drive like an artist. You catch the rhythm of the speed so well that it seems one is listening to a classical *taan*."

A light peacock feather moved over my heart. It was bliss! "Whatever my driving skills might be, your speaking skills are that of a true connoisseur. But you men really take care of each other's egos! Actually this praise should have reached Padhye's ears... but then of course he is your special friend."

Gradually our conversation started becoming more intimate. Just as his special regard for Padhye came pouring out in his speech, it also started circling around me teasingly. I felt drawn to him.

The three of us now treated each other with a playful freedom.

And then we started corresponding.

When I started confiding in him and when I started telling him the little details of my life, I myself did not realize it. It was so liberating to tell him about my joys, my sorrows, my humiliations... and then we started meeting occasionally in Mumbai. Whenever I went to Mumbai, he'd come over from his town... He was extremely sensitive. A chance sentence, a word dropped unawares would move him immeasurably. Emotions would then drip unabated. Especially when talking to Padhye, his feelings would flow freely.

If he failed to write for a time, Padhye would get restless. Then I'd tell Padhye, "No big deal! The letter will arrive in a day or so."

It was only after I started my independent correspondence with him that I understood his restlessness.

The restlessness of both of us had one origin.

Innocent and pure bonds of affection and love had got tightly intertwined.

We were sitting in the public park... this time I had come alone to Mumbai. Usually, after this outing in the park, we would go out to eat somewhere and then he would drop me at Prashant home and then leave for his place.

But today he said, "I'll sleep here today."

I set up his bed on the cot outside in the verandah. I went to sleep inside... and was soon fast asleep.

And then sometime in the middle of the night he woke me up.

"Come and sit near me. I simply cannot sleep. You were sleeping so soundly that I didn't feel like waking you up... but I was feeling so lonely that I had to."

My heart heaved. I could sense his restlessness.

"Come, let's sit outside," I said and led him out. Outside in the verandah, there was no place to sit. So I sat down on his bed and said, "You lie down. I'll sit with you till you go to sleep."

He lay down with his head in my lap and almost automatically I started running my hand through his hair.

That was our first touch.

This awareness was making me restless. He suddenly grabbed my hand and kept it tightly on his chest.

My hand lay calmly in his. I ran my hand over his face and said, "Don't worry about anything. I am here. I will not leave you till you go to sleep. See, you will soon be asleep."

Almost instantly he went to sleep. He slept peacefully, sweetly like an innocent child.

If anyone had told me that something like this had happened, I would not have believed it. I had lost faith in this kind of a friendship.

He left the next day.

That night's experience left me feeling very rich. My world of friendship suddenly became illuminated with gentle light.

If he had not gone to sleep quietly and peacefully, my emotional world would have overturned again.

Now I had to take care of it. For myself and for him too.

For the two of us... forever and ever.

After returning to Delhi, I wrote him a letter... without shackles. Freely... absolutely freely.

Nothing was weighing on my mind now.

I got an immediate reply. He wrote:

"I received your letter an hour back. I feel listless, like one feels after waking up from a long illness. Have still not got out of that. This is what happens when a wave of intense and deep emotion sweeps over one. For the first time I am experiencing that when a woman decides to give wholeheartedly, this is the way she gives. Till now I was trying to suppress my emotions, my words… but for the first time I have given free flow to both! Which is why I love dearly those who give freely. I wrote freely, even risking the fact that the emotions behind it may be insulted, ridiculed… but I couldn't stop myself. And when that was accepted so tenderly, with so much love, then how can I describe the joy I felt. Do not give so much at one go! The taker's hands might not be big enough to accept what you give… I am scared!

I am really grateful that you wrote with so much generosity and without keeping any distance. People are so afraid to give! Whenever they take a step forward, they keep free a path to back off! I never could behave with precise measuring and weighing of words and actions. It was always all or nothing. With full awareness of the result! But shall I tell you something? Nobody has been able to understand what I mean even before I say anything as well as you! That is why you will always be very close to me, bound in a very special relationship… always!

Any talk beyond this is not of words, but of touch.

I feel so relieved today! The torture within has stopped… what I received is priceless. It will never be disrespected!"

This was just one of the many letters. Filled with heightened emotion!

In another letter he wrote:

"As soon as I came to know that you are in Mumbai, I came from Pune much before it was due. With the feeling that I would meet you, talk to you… but you extended your hand so naturally! Then you went away and left some dust of gold behind…"

One more letter from him said:

"Once more such a night will come. I am really hopeful. Who do I write for? For sensitive minds like yours… One word of praise from you is like pure gold… this time too you will find one article by me in *Satyakatha*… have written two more. All together ten articles—a little volume will be ready. Whether others like it or not, if you like it, it will be all that I want!"

Another letter mentioned:

"I am too emotional a person… you are the one who will have to maintain the balance."

He seemed to be very sure of me when he said that I would have to maintain the balance. He wanted Padhye's friendship too. This triangle had to be balanced by the two of us. It was unbearable for both of us to forego the closeness of Padhye.

In another letter he said:

"This time I will get to meet both of you. I have not met Padhye for ages. I really long to meet him... through yours and Padhye's love, my belief in myself is revived again. That is the reason why I need it badly. So I cannot afford to have you angry with me ever."

His state of mind during this time was very emotional. He was not even able to do his writing work. We both were aware of his disturbed state of mind. And so he needed the support of both of us.

When I married Padhye, he was a believer in progressive ideas. I was raised in a priest's home and the cultural beliefs over my mind were traditional and orthodox. Obviously, I did not have the intellectual strength to bear the progressive ideas of R.B.'s house where Padhye was staying when I got married. During that sensitive and impressionable age, I simply could not figure out Padhye's strange and anti-traditional behavior. That must have been one of the reasons for the claustrophobia I felt immediately after marriage. I am sure Padhye had the intellectual capacity to understand all this. But the tension arising out of his own sentiments and the progressive ideas he was surrounded by must have created claustrophobia in his own mind too. Whenever it became unbearable for him he would remark, "Life is irrational" and move away. Instead of trying to understand me, he was nursing his own claustrophobia and becoming more and more withdrawn. The communicative Padhye that I had met through his letters before marriage had transformed into a withdrawn personality after marriage and my claustrophobia became more and more intense. A kind of aloofness had entered our relationship unknowingly. Later the claustrophobia vanished but the aloofness remained.

I received immeasurable love and affection in my life. But towards the end, it was my fate to bear it all on the basis of memories alone. Friendship between man and woman is an emotional need of humans. But why is there this need for friendship between man and woman? I have no answer to this. Even if someone has given it I have no desire to analyse it. The reason why the idea of Ardhnarinateshwar appeals to me is precisely because of this reason. To go beyond the relations of male and female and nurture the innocent enjoyment of each other's company is not present in this world of humans. That is the reason why all that this world can do is place such a relationship like Radha and Krishna on a pedestal and worship it. In reality this kind of affection and love is forbidden. This is the tragedy of these kinds of relationships. I do not understand the spirituality behind soul and divinity. But if the soul has to become divine then it has to be loving… this is the only truth that has appealed to me.

Translated by Leena Chandorkar *from the Marathi original*, "Bandh-Anubandh," *Bandh-Anubandh*, 1994.

❑

NOVEL EXCERPT

The Overturn

Nayan Raj Pandey

ONE

Premlalwa had voted for Rajendra Raj Sharma without a second thought. But his vote went down the gutter. Rajendra Raj lost with a huge gap. For Premlalwa, Rajendra Raj's loss was a shocking and painful experience.

The ballot boxes had been brought to the municipal office and counting of the votes begun. Ballot boxes from Shamser Ganj, Hanuman Nagar and Bagaunda had arrived late, so the counting also started later than expected. Throughout the night, Premlalwa joined the large mass convened outside the municipal office and keenly followed the latest counts announced every fifteen minutes. Towards dawn, he started to lose interest in the final result, since the trend showed that Rajendra Raj was surely facing defeat. Before long, Rajendra Raj's supporters also left the venue. His representatives were nowhere to be seen.

Premlalwa returned to his hut around 4 am and quickly hit the sack. For a good half an hour, he pondered over what might have led to Rajendra Raj's loss.

The rickshaw association guys surely played foul, he thought. Hundred percent traitors, those filthy bastards. But what would you expect from an association whose president is a bastard like Nanakau? A perfect bastard who eats somebody's salt and licks somebody else's boots. Premlalwa scorned Nanakau and other members of the rickshaw-pullers' association. Shitheads. Dickheads. Sons of bitches. Etc etc etc. He cursed their mothers and sisters with a natural flair.

Man should always be true to his words, he thought. The rickshaw pullers are not true to their words, he concluded.

It was none other than Rajendra Raj who had formed the association of the rickshaw pullers and the cart pullers. And how did the bastards pay him back? With betrayal.

Premlalwa fell asleep around dawn.

Draupadi. Or Daroupadi as he called her. She spat on his dark, dirty face. "Weren't you the one blowing Rajinder babu's trumpet?" She chided him. When he approached to kiss her, she butted him, and he tumbled on the floor. She crouched over his chest and yelled, "You can't get a wife, you whore-fucker. And you still touch me?" He was hurt by Draupadi's behaviour. Sadness and restlessness gripped him. Then he started to cry. He helplessly watched Draupadi sleep with Nanakau. Nanakau made love to Draupadi all night long. Premlalwa cried all night, hearing Draupadi moan and groan.

Premlalwa woke up with a sudden jolt.

Tears streamed down his eyes. What a terrible nightmare it was! Even now, he couldn't but be sad at Draupadi's misconduct. His temper rose, he wanted to run to her house immediately to wring her neck. But he also knew his anger wouldn't last long. What is the point of freaking out over a dream? He consoled himself and tried to keep calm.

* * * *

Kaluwa came to see Premlalwa around eight in the morning. Premlalwa was still in his slumber. He was now romancing with Draupadi. Kaluwa shouted into his ears, and he woke up, infuriated. "Son of a bitch," he shrieked. "My enemy! I'd just convinced Draupadi, and you woke me up. Bastard, bastard. Prem Chopra."

Kaluwa was carrying a bundle of posters. He pasted posters for a living. Posters urging you to follow family planning, posters advertising Bournvita and Horlicks, posters introducing you to Munna Khan the doctor who cured blemishes and hernia. For every hundred posters pasted, Kaluwa earned five rupees.

Kaluwa earned forty or fifty rupees in a day. If he works dedicatedly, from dawn to dusk, that is. By the end of the day, however, he won't have saved a paisa. Penniless everyday. He goes to the local bar and gulps down glass after glass of *Apsara*. Then he heads to Gaganganj. He loiters around Bhagwan Talowa for a while. "Should I go to Draupadi's place or to Sabitri's?" He asks himself once or twice. He realizes that the day Premlalwa found out that he was frequenting Draupadi, it would be the last day of his life. So he decides to visit Sabitri. A five rupee note dangling from between his fingers, and with his teeth stuck out of his wide open mouth, he puts his best smile in front of Sabitri.

"You won't get a bread for your five rupee note, boy, forget about me!" shoots Sabitri in a perfect rhyme.

"Le'mme do it today, please," Kaluwa pleads, "I'll pay you extra tomorrow".

"Go to the old hag over there," she points towards forty or forty-five year old Kunti.

"Don't joke, eh. Le'mme do it for this much today," Kaluwa insists. He knows that Sabitri will eventually give in. Bargaining is her old habit.

"No no no no. Five is too little," Sabitri stands firm. But she knows that she will eventually surrender.

A little while's pretension. A little while's quarrel. A little while's bargain. After the ritual bargaining, scolding and cursing, Sabitri and Kaluwa enter the room.

"Bargains with me, bitch!"

Inside, they fight some more.

Premlalwa is well aware of Kaluwa's debauchery.

"Did you visit Daroupadi, bastard?" Premlalwa asked.

"No, eh. *Maa kasam*," Kaluwa convinced him, swearing by his mother.

When Premlalwa went out to wash his face, Kaluwa pasted a poster of the film *Rangeela* and another that advised you to "use condom". When Premlalwa returned, wiping his face with a towel, Kaluwa announced, "See, eh! Your room looks like a cinema hall."

Premlalwa didn't pay any heed Kaluwa's excitement. "Tell me, bastard, why have you come today? You won't show your dirty face without any reason. Keep a distance, bastard, you stink of *pairiya*." Premlalwa said, and he himself moved away from Kaluwa.

"I need your cart for *Rangeela*'s announcements. I've talked to the hall manager about you. He's paying ninety rupees for the entire day. Eighty for you, ten for me. Commission, that is..."

"Ninety? Plain ninety?"

"How much else then? Will you apply oil and butter and take it?"

"Laxmi Cinema gave me a hundred rupees for *Jungle Ki Beti* the other day, eh! Breakfast too."

Premlalwa was clearly disappointed by the offer.

"Have you forgotten the thirty rupees you paid as commission to the bastard Thapa? Didn't you then get seventy only? The Bastard doesn't even know how to calculate," Kaluwa reprimanded.

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Premlalwa doesn't really know how to calculate. He gets "confooj" (confused) while calculating sums of fifty or hundred rupees. But, how was he to know anyway, since he never went to a school? He had been riding the cart since he was a ten-year-old. No father, no mother. He was barely eight when his father was crushed under a truck in front of Raju Babu's house. Asthma took his mother the same year. A single child, he became a loner, an orphan.

Premlalwa's devotion to Rajendra Raj had not developed for no reason. Rajendra Raj had a heart of a cow. He was helpful in every way you could imagine. His benevolence was extended to all and sundry, from birth to death. He was ever ready to fight with anyone for the benefit of the poor. If necessary, he could speak English, too.

It was none other than Rajendra Raj who had arranged for an eight-thousand rupee compensation from the owner of the truck that had killed Premlalwa's father. Of course, there had been rumours that Rajendra Raj took eighteen himself and gave Premlalwa only eight. But he didn't give his ears to such rumours. Once he received the compensation, his never known uncles and cousins had appeared from nowhere, fixing their vulture-eyes on the eight thousand rupees. "Let's go to Nanapara and open a splendid *paan* shop," somebody suggested. "Marry my niece," somebody else proposed. "Let me safekeep your cash," a third one offered. All of them had one intention: to lay their hands on the eight thousand rupees. But Rajendra Raj saved him. He opened a bank account in Premlalwa's name. When he reached ten, Rajendra Raj bought him a cart with the money.

The cart bought; there was no horse to pull it. For almost a year, he rented out the cart for seven rupees a day. But then he realized that it was difficult to make a living by renting out the cart. Seven rupees a day was nothing during the inflation those days. Thankfully, he had not yet learnt to indulge in liquor. Otherwise, he would have remained hungry for twenty days in a month. The benefit of not drinking was, he went hungry for just ten days a month instead of twenty. He ate only one meal a day so as not to sleep with an empty stomach on other days.

* * * *

Premlalwa's ancestral house stood where Sila Babu's party office stands now. The house in which he grew up, where his father lived his entire life, and where his mother died. In which he, too, nearly died of pneumonia.

Earlier, Sila Babu and Rajendra Raj were with the same political party. They were very close to each other. Sila Babu was a powerful central leader, Rajendra Raj an influential local leader. Both were indispensable for each other. It was through Rajendra Raj that Premlalwa had met Sila Babu for the first time. Sila Babu hugged Premlalwa each time they met, patted him on his shoulders and thighs. Later, Premlalwa tried to remain cautious of Sila Babu. Sila Babu somehow appeared like Bharose, whom Premlalwa disdained. He had seen Bharose cuddle up with Nanakau at many occasions.

Anyhow, he had a hut on an expensive land by the road. The hut fared nothing. But the land—well, it was a piece of diamond.

Once, when Premlalwa was down with pneumonia and his cart had stopped earning, leaving him unable to make a hand to mouth living, Rajendra Raj gave him a piece of advice.

"Sell the hut."

He sold his hut and the land for thirty thousand rupees. "In case Sila Babu asked you, tell him you have received one lakh," Rajendra Raj had advised him. When Sila Babu asked him, he said he had received one lakh. But he could never fathom why Rajendra Raj had asked him to lie. With his right thumb, he smudged indigo on the paper mentioning a deal of one lakh rupees, and took home thirty thousand. How was he to know whoever had taken the rest of the money? Anyhow, Sila Babu bought the land and erected his party office there.

Premlalwa then spent twenty thousand rupees on a half-*ropani* land at Korianpurwa. The land had a small hut, too. With the remaining ten thousand, he bought a mare. He had now fully recovered from pneumonia.

Once the mare was bought, he recruited Ismail to drive his cart, and he apprenticed him personally. He had now to learn to ride the cart himself. He mastered the art of riding in a month and said good bye to Ismail. Now that he had started to earn about fifty to one hundred rupees daily, he elevated himself out of penury. On account of his small frame, he frequently received the wrath of policemen at the barriers. *Saala*, this kid as little as my dick rides the cart, they said. *Saala*, this kid without hair in his groins rides the cart, they said. To prove that he was old enough, Premlalwa showed them the citizenship and the license cards Rajendra Raj had arranged for him with fake documents. The policemen, after seeing the citizenship and the license cards and the photo of a young Premlalwa pasted on them, said, "Go go kid, go ahead. Move your cart."

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Ultimately, Premlalwa agreed to take his cart out with Kaluwa for making the announcement. He also approved the ten-rupee commission for Kaluwa. Kaluwa asked two rupees as advance, and Premlalwa readily gave him that. Together they stepped out of the house. Kaluwa was bewildered to see Premlalwa leaving without locking the door. "There is nothing for anyone to steal in my hut," Premlalwa said. Kaluwa nodded, assured.

After fastening the mare and the cart together, Premlalwa and Kaluwa climbed on to the cart and started their ride. Premlalwa was uncertain as to how long into the night the hut will remain alone. The hut. That which he had bought just after the dawn of democracy.

Basanti was the name he had given to his mare. When *Sholay* came to the town first, he watched it with a ninety-five paise ticket bought in black for two rupees. He gave the name Basanti to his mare after the name of *Sholay*'s mare. It was only later that he realized that the name of *Sholay*'s mare was Dhanno, and Basanti was the name of the lady cart rider. Once he realized his mistake, he regretted and tried to call her Dhanno. By then, however, his mare had already become popular as Basanti.

Carrying Kaluwa, the posters, rice-gum, the microphones and its batteries, and Gupta, the one who was to speak into the mike, the cart toured around the bazaar. In the evening, Premlalwa took his ninety rupees from the hall manager and gave eight rupees to Kaluwa. Then he returned home and kept the cart and tied the mare in their respective places and went out.

* * * *

It never occured to her to think why she was called Draupadi. In fact, her actual name was not Draupadi. It was Sita.

What's in a name, after all? It's what you do that matters. By profession, she was a prostitute. An avid woman.

She finds the municipal toilet much cleaner than the house in which she lives now, in which she grew up. But she is used to staying admist the dirt. The dirt of her house and of her room and her bed appear normal to her.

She has parents. She also has a nine or ten year-old daughter. Who fathered the daughter, she doesn't know. At times, her daughter's face resembles the face of Krishna Bahadur, the sub-inspector. At other times, it resembles that of Jagatman, the sub-inspector. And at yet other times, she thinks her daughter looks like Harkaman, the former village headman.

Not to forget that at yet other times, she sees Asmal, the scavenger from Baharaicha, in her daughter's face. Unable to arrive at any conclusion, she has stopped thinking who the father of her daughter might be. She has bequeathed her earlier name to her daughter—Sita.

Draupadi's father has lost his hearing lately. So, he can't find customers for his daughter. The business has gone down. Earlier, Draupadi's mother too was in the same profession. That used to make it easier to run the household. The financial burden of the entire household has now fallen on Draupadi. Her mother is bedridden with some chronic disease. She must be forty or forty five years old but looks like sixty or seventy. She coughs and groans all day. Her intermittent coughing and groaning is also a reason why the number of Draupadi's customers is falling down. Slowly her regular customers have also stopped frequenting. The old woman's yelling turns off all the excitement, they say. So her father is always angry with her mother. "Why don't you die, whore?" he yells. Draupadi does not know her mother's name. But, one day, she had casually asked her mother if her name was Sita. "How did you know?" Her mother had asked her, astonished.

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Clutching a bottle of local liquor in his hand, Premlalwa entered Draupadi's room. A while earlier, there was somebody inside the room. So, when Premlalwa entered inside the room, Draupadi was fixing her sari.

Premlalwa was visiting Draupadi after three days, charged. Aroused. For three days and nights he had worked, without taking a paisa, for Rajendra Raj's campaign. He even bought fodder for Basanti out of his own savings. For three days, his earning was nil. Earning money was not his worry at all. His only worry was that Rajendra Raj lost the election.

"Whom did you give your vote to?" Premlalwa asked.

"My name wasn't in the list, so I came back just like that. Krishnaa voted for Santi Raja. The "Vadi Utthan" activists had given her a hundred rupees, so."

"Whores. Never trust whores." Premlalwa uncorked the bottle and gulped down half of the liquor at once.

"You whores don't know people, who is Rajender Babu and who Santi Raja. You whores sell yourselves for a hundred rupees..." he started to shout as the alcohol started shooting up to his head.

"Have you come to fight?" Draupadi yelled at him. Then he remembered what he was visiting Draupadi for.

"Get me some onion," he ordered. He wanted to eat onions for snacks with liquor.

"No, I won't... it stinks."

"It doesn't stink when you kiss while sleeping with others, whore," Premlalwa said. "Only my mouth stinks to you?"

Draupadi didn't respond after that. She didn't give him onions either. He slipped his hand inside his underwear and fished out ten rupees from the bundle of sixty and threw them in front of Draupadi. She took the money and kept it inside her bra.

"What did Kaluwa say to you?" He asked indirectly. In fact, he wanted to know whether Kaluwa visited her or not.

"Why wouldn't he visit Sabitri instead of coming to me?" Draupadi's reply convinced him. He felt relieved.

"I love you, Daroupadi."

"It's not your love but the alcohol speaking, bastard."

"Don't tell me such things, eh! I'm serious. If you don't believe me, should I tear open my chest and show you?" Out of excitement, he pulled at his shirt. A couple of buttons gave way. Both of them laughed.

Draupadi—when his Draupadi laughs, he falls head over heels for her. He cannot help being naughty with her. She keeps laughing, giggling, chuckling.

After ten or fifteen minutes, both of them turned their backs to each other and stared at the walls and the ceiling.

"I'll elope with you someday."

"You'll elope with me? With a whore?"

"What's wrong with that? You're my queen, my Sridevi." Draupadi, hardly convinced, kept laughing. How was she to believe him? Everyone says the same thing to her.

But when Premlalwa says so, her heart leaps into the air for sometime. She starts dreaming.

"Who'll bother whether I elope with a whore or whosoever? I'm a loner. Who's there to stop me from doing anything?" Premlalwa's words keep her dreaming for some more time.

While Premlalwa was about to leave, Draupadi dropped him off to the door of her hut, and, like a woman would speak to her husband, said, "Go well. And listen, you've become weak nowadays. Take some vitamins."

Draupadi's words made him feel that he too had someone he could call his own.

He became overwhelmed and, planting a kiss on Draupadi's cheek, said, "Always keep smiling, okay, my dear!"

But Draupadi couldn't tell him that. Nowadays, she weeps all night because of the pain in her back.

She weeps all night.

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After coming home, he lay on the bed. And he started looking around. Home. A home, really? A cot and a few aluminum utensils. The bar that separated him and the mare in the same room. Horse-feed, and the smell of the mare's dung. "Use condom" posters that Kaluwa often pasted. Walls ready to crumble this monsoon or the next. A ceiling that leaked and made the room a hell during monsoon. And much bitter loneliness. Do I call it home? Damn it, is this even home? He asked himself. Who had an answer?

What if the house collapsed? How would I rebuild it? Will it be possible to build a house by pulling a cart? He saw darkness in front of himself. Total darkness.

Though poor and a bastard, Kaluwa was luckier, thought Premlalwa. Kaluwa had a family. If Kaluwa didn't return home for a few nights, his wife ran from pillar to post looking for him, wailing. When his children found him, they cheerfully pulled at his hands and pestered him.

"Who do I have?" He expressed his discontent to himself. His discontent just poured out. Just spilled. Who was there to collect it?

Once, out of nowhere, Draupadi appeared at Premlalwa's hut.

"Do you live here eh, Premlalwa?" Draupadi asked him.

He felt ashamed.

That day, he could not think of making love to Draupadi. He could not even touch her. It astounded Draupadi. "Trying to act like a saint, eh," she teased him. Still, he didn't do anything to her.

He offered her a packet of raw *waiwai* noodles. It was the best dish he thought there was. Pouring some sugar in a glass of water and stirring it with his index finger, he made a sweet drink for Draupadi. He served her the drink in an aluminum saucer.

Draupadi leaned against his chest. He caressed her lovingly.

That day, he did not see a whore in Draupadi. He didn't see a prostitute in her. He didn't see an avid woman in her. Neither a slut, nor a bitch, but just a woman. In her, he saw a Draupadi full of love.

"Why do you do that dirty work?" He asked.

"Why do you ride the cart?" She asked. Then he didn't ask anything. A long curtain of silence fell in between.

He was always troubled by a curious question regarding Draupadi.

He decided to ask her today. And after contemplating for a while he asked, "How do you feel when you sleep with others?"

"I don't feel anything," Draupadi said just that much.

"And what about when you sleep with me?" He asked again.

"I can't say. I feel a lot of different things." After saying this she kept silent again, and after a long silence she said, "Shall I tell you the truth? When you undress me, I feel shy."

Nothing else happened that day. Draupadi went back just like that. He wanted to give her twenty or thirty rupees but she declined. "Give it to me when you come to my place," she said.

While leaving, Draupadi looked back at his "house", and in an odious, desolate, dreamy, tempting way, asked, "This is your house, isn't it? Your own...?"

After Draupadi left, he played her last question in his head for a long time.

And, then, he liked this house, his "own," for the first time.

"Can Draupadi manage in this house?" This question lingered in his head for a long time.

TWO

Soon after the elections results were announced, Nanakau came to Premlalwa's hut and announced the victory of Shanti Raja, excited.

"There's going to be a victory rally now," said Nanakau. "We need eighteen to twenty carts. You too should come. It won't be more than three hours. One hundred rupees for only three hours."

Premlalwa was caught up in a dilemma for a while. He had worked for Rajendra Raj until yesterday. Would it be a good idea to take the cart for Shanti Raja's victory rally today?

For a moment, he decided not to go. His heart, too, told him not to. But he convinced himself somehow. What's the harm in taking my cart out for the rally? If the mare became friends with the grass, what would he eat, he thought.

No... I need the money. I need to save every paisa. How else am I going to build a house? How am I going to get married? Or, will I remain a bachelor forever? "You've matured enough to stink like a he-goat, eh," Kaluwa had said the other day. Kaluwa's remarks had amplified his sense of loneliness.

Eventually, he went with Nanakau.

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Of late, Basanti is not keeping well. There is a sore on her back. Pus keeps oozing out of it. He has been thinking of taking her to the veterinary doctor but he hasn't had an opportunity. Taking her to the hospital meant keeping the cart out of work for an entire day.

That is why Premlalwa wanted to give ride to no more than five to seven people on his cart. But when could he afford to do what he wanted? Everyone was joyous about the victory. Who could stop anyone? No less than sixteen or seventeen people climbed on to his cart.

The rally began. Shanti Raja was covered with vermillion, flowers and garlands. It was difficult to even recognize his face. He was inside a jeep. There were about twenty or twenty-five more people in the jeep. Nanakau was also inside the jeep on the back seat. Nanakau's face was also gleaming. It was as if he had won the election himself.

"The bastard became a powerful man," he told himself jealously as he rode the cart. "Had Rajinder Babu won the election," he thought, "I know what I would have done."

His cart was moving along with fifteen or twenty other carts. All the carts were moving ahead at their own speed. But Basanti had to be whipped a little more. She was walking uneasily. He could not feed her the *khudi* at daytime. She must be hungry as well. He felt pity for Basanti. But what was the point in pitying at that moment?

A few more boys kept climbing on to the cart. He protested once, saying that the cart was over-burdened. The boys nearly beat him up. So he could not say anything, but kept on moving the cart.

Halfway through the rally, Basanti could walk no longer. Her breathing came faster. Her belly swollen, looked like a pitcher. Her body was covered with sweat. The horseshoe had also gone out of place. That added to the difficulty. Pus was still flowing from the wound.

At times, he felt like asking the boys to get down and push off from the procession. He could not do that either.

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Shanti Raja was visiting all the houses and the shops, shaking hands with and hugging everyone. People were also reciprocating proudly.

Premlalwa saw Kaluwa hug Shanti Raja. "Son of a swine," he muttered to himself.

Even as he rode his cart for Shanti Raja's victory rally, Premlalwa did not shake hands with Shanti Raja himself. Nor did Premlalwa hug with him. That would be a dishonest act, he thought. But what about Kaluwa? Dishonest folks like him eat somebody's bread and serve somebody else. Once again, he swore on the name of Kaluwa's mother and sister, and planned kick to to kick him in his groin once he met him after the victory rally.

Two people among the many who were riding in the cart were chatting with each other. For some reason, their words caught Premlalwa's attention. Even when his eyes looked ahead, he directed his ear towards his back to get a sense of what they were talking about.

"Do you think Shanti Raja would have won the election without the support of Rajendra Raj? I had seen with my own eyes when Shanti Raja handed over a stack of five lakh rupees to Rajendra Raj. Rajendra Raj had asked seventy percent of his followers to vote for Shanti Raja."

For a moment, Premlalwa was caught in a puzzle. How can there be such a big betrayal? But, simple minded as he was, he did not believe in their talk, thinking it was baseless. Instead, he stopped listening to their talk.

Now Basanti could not move an inch forward.

It occurred to him that she would not even stir. Even after ten or twenty whips, Basanti did not move. She started hissing. The riders in the cart advised him to whip her more, but Premlalwa thought it was not a good omen. He thought it unwise to keep whipping Basanti, and he stopped.

When the situation got worse and Basanti's legs started wobbling, everyone jumped off the cart at one go. The cart lost balance. Basanti tumbled down really hard, unconscious.

Premlalwa saw stars all around. He felt dizzy. He thought, he too, was about to fall down.

Had Kaluwa not appeared out of nowhere to hold him, Premlalwa would have collapsed.

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Kaluwa and Premlalwa had a hard time bringing Basanti home. Even after arriving home, Basanti collapsed again.

"It's not a good sign, eh," cautioned Kaluwa, amplifying Premlalwa's anxiety.

"Take her to Banke Bagiya early tomorrow," Kaluwa advised, hinting at the veterinary hospital. Premlalwa nodded.

"It takes a lot of money, doesn't it?" Premlalwa asked nervously.

"Yes, it does. Five hundred rupees, or may be a thousand, I think," Kaluwa calculated.

Premlalwa had a total cash saving of seven hundred and fifty rupees.

If Nanakau paid him for the day's ride for the rally, it would make a total of eight hundred and fifty.

"The bastard Nanakau won't give you your hundred rupees, that's for certain. He is the number one son of a bitch," Kaluwa said. That made Premlalwa nervous.

As expected, when Premlalwa visited Nanakau in the evening to collect his due, he said, "Why should I give you the money for you returned half way?" Then, as if out of sympathy, he offered him twenty-five rupees. Premlalwa felt helpless, dejected. He took the twenty-five rupees, and left without saying a word.

Premlalwa could not sleep all night. What would I do if it costs more than seven or eight hundred rupees? Where would I get the remaining amount? All night long, he was lost in such thoughts.

Draupadi, who came to his dream every other night, did not come that night. He did not see any episode of his loving Draupadi, hating her or being mad at her. He saw only his poverty and darkness.

He looked at Basanti's agitation all night, helpless. At times, he felt that Basanti was helplessly looking at him. She would tell me of her pains if she could speak, he thought. She would tell him where her pain was, and how much.

All night, Basanti and Premlalwa looked at each other, helpless.

* * * *

In the morning, the situation in the city was not good. A petty quarrel was festering into a communal riot. At Chowkbazaar, shops were closed. People had started looking at each other suspiciously.

Premlalwa got up early and caressed Basanti. Basanti opened her eyes and peered at him.

"Can you get up, Basanti? Can we go to the hospital?" He asked her, pretending she would understand. Pretending she had understood, she obliged, standing up with great difficulty.

Premlalwa walked Basanti towards the hospital. Upon reaching the chowk, he realized that the situation ahead was not favourable. Mobs were shouting, pelting stones at each other.

Premlalwa and Basanti had to reach the hospital anyhow. They kept walking, pretending they had not seen anybody or anything.

Then, suddenly, a mob appeared in front of them. They surrounded Premlalwa and asked whether he was Hindu or Muslim. For a while, he was perplexed, unable to decide what would be best to say. Somebody from the mob kicked Basanti ruthlessly. She shuddered and tumbled on the ground. Then, before Premlalwa, petrified and panicked, could utter a word, somebody said, "Leave him. He's Hindu."

The mob moved away.

He had a hard time getting Basanti to stand up again. Then, after a long, tiresome journey, they reached the veterinary hospital at Banke Bagiya.

After spending three hundred and fifty rupees on medicine and another hundred on a bandage, he was now left with only three hundred. With the remaining three hundred rupees and Basanti, he left for home at two thirty or three.

Upon approaching the main road, Premlalwa noticed that there was a curfew.

All roads leading home were blocked. Basanti's condition had not improved even after she was fed and injected with medicines. She shivered as if she was feeling cold. Premlalwa also started shivering, scared.

After sauntering a while, Basanti showed no signs of moving an inch ahead. Preplexed, Premlalwa couldn't decide what to do. He did not see anybody he knew around. No one who cared for him.

Basanti collapsed again. She jerked her legs and convulsed. Froth oozed out of her mouth. What would happen next?

Premlalwa fell unconscious for a moment. Got totally senseless. Who died?

Basanti or he?

He or Basanti?

It was Basanti who was dead, he concluded.

Now, all that remained with Premlalwa were three hundred rupees, Basanti's corpse and a dreadful future.

What was he to do with Basanti's body now? He could not think of anything. He could not even cry at such a moment. He kept enduring the pain of his own tears flowing, spilling somewhere within his own self.

The eerie silence of the curfew seeped into his mind. Eventually, he abandoned Basanti's corpse and entered the curfewed city.

Translated by Dinesh Kafle *from the Nepali original, Ullar,* 1998.

❑

Negotiating the Spiritual: Purushottama Choudhari and Early 19th Century Christian Literature in Telugu

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K.W. Christopher

Dalit and exclusion studies have focused attention on minority literatures that have not yet been accommodated in the literary canon. Despite the recent scholarly interest in the literatures of the marginalized, Christian literature in Indian languages in general and Telugu Christian literature in particular still remains an unmapped terrain. Even postcolonial studies that focus on the colonial encounters in India show no engagement with the work of early Christian writers in the *bhashas* (Indian languages) like Narayan Vaman Tilak, Nehemiah Goreh, Brahma Bandhab Upadhyay, and Vedanayagam Sastriar. This evasion/erasure stems from a particular postcolonialist mode of perceiving India in Hindu nationalist terms.

Commenting on the paucity of scholarly attention towards Indian Christian cultural production Stephen Neill in his magisterial history of the Indian church observes:

> No general study has yet been made of the work of Indian Christian poets in the many languages in which the Gospel was being preached during the nineteenth century. Such a study would be valuable, and might be invaluable as revealing strands in Indian Christianity which are often overlooked. There is a tendency to exaggerate the dependence of Indian Christian thought on the West and its traditions and its consequent lack of originality. This may be true of theologians; a study of the poets suggest that these devotees, while grateful to the Western friends who had brought them the Gospel, were from the start determined that Indian Christianity should be unmistakably and uncompromisingly Indian. (1985:412)

Neill's observations, though made in the context of church historiography, can be extended to literary studies in India as well. Despite the general neglect, a few Christian poets in Tamil, Marathi and Bengali have received some attention in histories of Indian literatures (Das, 1981) but Telugu Christian poets rarely find a mention in mainstream literary historiography barring notable exceptions like Arudra (1984) and Gopalakrishna Rao (1976). Influential scholars of Telugu in the Anglophone academia like Velcheru Narayan Rao and David Schulman show a preoccupation with Sanskritic Telugu traditions and so far have not shown any engagement with other traditions in Telugu. Work on Telugu Christian literature is very sparse in the first place and is confined to only scholars in the seminaries. It is only recently that Dalit writers have begun to explore the Dalit Christian literary archive.

The erasure of 'other' literatures stems from certain postcolonial tendencies to perpetuate the orientalist binary—'us/them', colonizer/colonized—homogenizing the colonized and thus masking the micro narratives of gender, caste, and class. Some of the recent interrogations of colonialism in the Indian context by Anglophone and Indian scholars veer dangerously close towards the Hindutva nationalist reading of colonialism that characterizes it as an encounter between Hindu and Christian cultures *a la* Samuel Huntington's 'clash of civilizations' (1996). India in such formulations is imagined as a 'great civilization' 'wounded' by a series of external invasions—the Islamic and the European—that eventually 'destroyed' and 'corrupted' it. Consequently caste, *sati*, female infanticide, *devadasi* system and Hinduism itself are seen as colonial inventions (Pennington, 2005; Derks, 2001). Such an essentialist reading of colonialism, apart from homogenizing the colonized, inscribes passivity into the colonized thereby denying any agency.

The colonial encounter despite its 'violence' (Ngugi, Fanon, 2004) was never a one way process but also generated responses from native traditions. As Will Sweetman puts it: "The colonial encounter was not merely an arena in which ideas originating in the European metropolis were projected and forcibly imposed on the colonized, but rather a process in which those ideas took their modern shape through the actions of both the colonizer and colonized" (2005). Few scholars have begun to focus on the native 'vernacular' literary responses to colonialism (Vijayasree, 2005). Unlike postcolonial theorists who drawing from Edward Said's *Orientalism* argue that western knowledges "created" an India (through translation, census, medicine, science, religion, art) only to master it, scholars and critics in the Indian languages (*bhashas*) saw colonialism as also a facilitator, a catalyst that ushered far reaching changes. The work of the missionaries and colonial officials in the South like Ziegenbalg, Benjamin Schulze, G.U. Pope, Caldwell, Des Granges, Prichett, Mackenzie, and C.P. Brown, negotiated in complex ways with colonial administration, education, religion and native cultures.

This paper seeks to explore the complexity of colonial encounter through the life and career of the famous early 19th century Telugu Christian poet Purushottama Choudhari.

Christian literature in Telugu dates back to early 17th century and most of it is a product of the Roman Catholic missionary endeavours.The Italian missionaries of the order of St Caetano at Goa were sent to Golconda and Chandragiri under Vijayanagara kings in latter part of the 16th century. They produced catechisms in Sanskrit as well as Telugu which are considered to be the earliest Christian works in Telugu. The 17th century Jesuit Robert de Nobili of the Madurai mission too is credited with some works in Telugu but no copies have survived. Pinagali Ellanarya's *Thobhya Charitra* (a poetic rendition of Tobias in Roman Catholic Bible), Mangalagiri Aananda Kavi's *Vedantarasayanamu*, Mallela Thimmaraju's *Gnanachintamani* are the earliest creative works with Christian themes (Brown, 1840). Despite their literary merits they are not acknowledged as part of 'true' Christian literature since they were putatively "commissioned" works. (Literary scholarship is divided on the authors being Christians (Brown, 1840)). The Roman Catholic missionaries from Europe produced devotional literature in Telugu which included catechisms, summaries of the gospels. However it is only from the early 19th century that Protestant Telugu Christian literature became a vibrant tradition with numerous writers like William Dawson[1], Pulipaka Jagannatham, producing a sizeable corpus of devotional literature.

The Danish Mission in Tranquebar (Tarangambadi) introduced the print culture in Telugu. This print culture initiated by the missionaries gave rise to the public sphere in India (Menon 2002). Even before William Carey began his work at Serampore, Benjamin Shulze of the Tranquebar Mission initiated pioneering work in print culture in Tamil as well as Telugu. Apart from his translation of the *Bible* into Telugu (subsequently lost) he printed four books in Telugu in Halle. *Mokshamunaku Konchupoye Tova* printed in 1742 was the first book to be printed in Telugu (Mangamma 1970). The 18th and 19th century missionary activities gave rise to lot of literature—polemical, evangelical and literary—which strangely remains unacknowledged in the dominant literary discourse (Murdoch 1870). The missionaries learnt Telugu with the help of native scholars and their use of the language came in for derision from some quarters, however their contribution to Telugu language by way of lexicography, translations, standardizing of grammar has generally been acknowledged by native scholars (Lalitha, Arudra, Mangamma, Bangore, Donappa).

The missionaries use of Telugu, in the initial stages at least, sounded "alien" "outlandish" as some contemporary critiques testify but strangely a stereotype of native 'Christian Telugu' was constructed over the years. The Telugu used by the native Christians was described as stilted and pedantic. Velcheru Narayan Rao the most visible and influential Telugu scholar abroad sums up the popular misconception about "Christian Telugu":

> The native Christian converts knew the missionary Telugu sounded different, but they had neither scholarly equipment to offer a critique nor the status to offer suggestions to the revered priests. They quietly accepted it, and even emulated it in their own religious use as the respectable language of scripture, while Hindu scholars paid no attention to it at all (2004:147)

Narayan Rao for strange reasons ignores the archival sources pertaining to Telugu Christian writers and denies native Christians any position of agency. Gurram Joshua, the iconic Telugu poet, himself a Dalit Christian, also perpetuates the stereotype of "Christian Telugu". In the *Preface* to his *Kristu Charitra* (Life of Christ) he sounds apologetic about Christian usage of Telugu. The stereotyped "Christian Telugu" continues to be circulated in contemporary popular culture through films and television.

Some of the native converts came from scholarly background and were employed by the missionaries in the schools, seminaries and printing presses run by them. It was these early converts who shaped the protestant literary tradition in Telugu. Purushottama Choudhari (1803-1890) the foremost Christian poet belonged to this group. He produced over fifteen major works in different literary forms in Telugu such as *Kavya*, *Sataka*, and *Prabandha* besides several tracts on theology, apologetics, Christian doctrine and ethics. He was also associated with the translation work of Rev Dr Hay (Hooper, 1963:91-93) and authored the earliest bible concordance in Telugu (Choudhari 1935). Choudhari composed over 200 *keertanas* set in *ragas* and *talas* of the south Indian music (Carnatic Music). Choudhari's work though distinct from non-Christian Telugu literature was embedded in indigenous aesthetic, cultural and spiritual discourses. He also authored what is probably one of the earliest critiques of caste system by an 'upper caste' convert. Choudhari also has parallels with the famous 18th century Tanjavur Tamil Christian poet Vedanayagam Sastriar.

Purushottama Choudhari was born in a Gouda Brahmin family on September 5, 1803 in Madanapur in Ganjam district. His ancestors had migrated two centuries ago from Bengal and settled in Parlakimidi in Ganjam during the Mughal period and were variously employed as court poets, tax collectors (*mirasdars*) and *Karanams* (clerks). Purushottama Choudhari's childhood was steeped in classical and vedic learning and he soon became proficient in Sanskrit, Telugu, Bangla and Utkala. From a very early age he showed great predilection for spirituality. He was reputed for his musical talent and learning and was employed as a court *vidwan* in Parlakimidi *Samsthana*. The death of his father prompted him into a yearning for spiritual fulfilment. The desire to attain true salvation through a *satguru* (true teacher) became an obsession. He experimented with different teachings, sects and cults, in the process he became an *avadhutha* (mendicant), an *aghori* and even made an abortive attempt to run away to Varanasi. In 1825 his brother Jagannadha Choudhari handed him a tract in Telugu probably printed by William Carey at Serampore. He was indifferent to the contents and put it away in a chest but returned to it at sometime later. It aroused his interest. It needs to be mentioned here that the tracts in vernaculars produced by missionaries were far from readable (in terms of language) and Carey's tract was no exception yet it made an indelible impression on Choudhari. At that time the *Bible* had not been translated into Telugu completely and there was no unanimity regarding the truthfulness of translations.[2] However, certain portions of the gospels translated by Cran, Des Granges (1810) and Pritchett (1819) were in circulation (Mullens, 1864:9-13). Purushottam Choudhari could gain access to these translations only at a later stage. His long unfulfilled desire to find a *satguru* was rekindled on reading the tract and this subsequently led him to few more tracts printed by the missionaries in Bellary. As he himself narrated in his testimony he travelled on foot for hundreds of miles in search of spiritual guidance (Choudhari 1833:154). This strong yearning for a guru was a part of the vaishnava bhakti traditions that Choudhari imbibed from his childhood and quite naturally he refers to Christ as a *satguru* in many of his works.

He sought to know more about the new faith but was not successful in finding a person who could provide guidence. In 1832 some one directed him to a Roman Catholic Church in Vizagpatnam (Vishakapatnam) but Choudhari who had already tried different traditions within Hinduism by then was disappointed at the sight of idols in the church and turned back without conversing with the priest. Rev James Dawson (1784-1832) of the London Missionary Society (LMS) who was active in that "station" had died in the same year, so his attempt to engage in a spiritual discourse with an influential Christian preacher in that area did not fructify (Badley 1886: 33). During that period the East India Company battalions were stationed at Vijayanagaram, Srikakulam (Chicacole), and Parlakimidi to quell the uprisings by the local *zamindars*. The 41st battalion at Srikakulam had a few practicing Christians that included Maj. Baxter, Capt. Keating, Gen. Taylor, and Capt. Campbell (Russell 1856). It was these officers who helped Pursushottama Choudhari in his spiritual quest.

He met Mrs. Helen Knott in Srikakulam who gave him a translation of St Luke's gospel. Choudhari was also able to make acquaintance with Major Brett who commanded the battalion of European Veterans in the fort of Vizagapatnam and also associated with the London Missionary Society. From him he obtained Prichett's translation of the *Bible*. As Purushottama Choudhari acknowledges in his letters, it was Mrs. Helen Knott who provided him spiritual guidance, and he always referred to her fondly as "my spiritual mother". In 1833 he took baptism in Cuttak, but even before that, he renounced his sacred thread (*yagnopavitha*) worn by the "twice-born"(*dwijas*) thus rejecting his caste. This was not an easy thing because the sacred thread, a symbol of *samskara*, was a marker of exclusivity and privilege in the secular space. Choudhari's conversion narrative can be obtained from *Autobiography of a Native Convert* (1833)

His baptism was a public event. Rev. Lasey who officiated at his baptism wrote:

> Lord's Day, October 6th, 1833, was fixed upon as the day for his baptism. The Circuit Judge readily granted us the use of the large tank, near the kutcheeree, which being in a central place, close to the large road, and near the bazaar, was well suited for the administration of the sacred ordinance. We had a hymn, a prayer, and an address in the native language; and there were certainly not fewer than a thousand persons present. As soon as the previous service was over, the crowd involuntarily placed themselves on the grassy sloping banks of the fine tank, and the scene was most interesting. The multitude was silent, and the administrator and candidate descended the steps into the water, and the ordinance was administered. The sacred names were repeated, both in the English and native languages. The reasons for so public a place being fixed upon were, first, that a large company might be brought together and addressed; and then, that by seeing how baptism was administered, the people might be disabused of a number of ridiculous notions, which the interested have industriously propagated for the purpose of prejudicing the public against the ordinance (229).

Conversion was as problematic then as it is still today. The colonial administration inscribed conversion in administrative and juridical terms making the convert's identity a complicated thing as Chandra Mallampalli (2004) shows in his study of South Indian Christians during colonial period. The conversion of Choudhari's younger contemporary Pulipaka Jagannadham evoked such a hostile response from his relatives that his baptism necessitated military escort (Lovett 1899:130). Choudhari upon his conversion was ostracized by his family and community and faced humiliations and even physical attacks. His wife and child were separated from him. Eventually his wife Radhamani Devi following her husband's footsteps became a Christian. He served as a catechist initially and was ordained in 1837 and became an itinerant preacher travelling thousands of miles on foot (Wardlaw 1845). In Srikakulam he worked with Rev William Dawson (son of James Dawson of LMS) who was a poet himself in Telugu.

Purushottama Choudhari's conversion and consequent literary production exemplifies the complex relationship between colonialism and native cultural productions. He created a body of literature that was rooted in native traditions yet negotiated in creative and original fashion with the new faith in its Western form (Durairaj Singh).

Colonial Encounter and Music

The new faith brought a new mode of worship that was distinct from the native forms/traditions in a number of ways. In contrast to Hindu forms of worship, the Protestant tradition is founded on the principle of "corporate worship" (corpus-body of Christ-church) where the congregation is an active participant. Congregational singing is a distinguishing feature of protestant worship that had earned it the epithet "singing church". Martin Luther himself composed many hymns, the most popular being *Ein Feste Burg*. The new faith also introduced liturgy – a highly structured worship where the laity performed a key function. It may be noted that liturgical music contributed to the growth and richness of Western classical music. J.S. Bach (to some extent Handel and Buxtehude) more than any other composer contributed to the development of protestant sacred music with his cantatas and oratorios. Almost all important composers since have experimented with liturgical music by way of a *Requiem* or a *Missa*.

Hymn emerged as a preferred genre of Protestant Church music. Yet hymn as poetry has not been given a high place in literature but was seen as a poor cousin of poetry proper, characterized by clichés, predictable feelings and wooden rhythms. Dr. Samuel Johnson was very critical of the poetic content in the hymns though he considered Milton and Isaac Watts as exceptions (Watson 1999). Commenting on the limitations of hymn as poetry he remarked:

> The essence of poetry is invention; such invention as, by producing something unexpected, surprises and delights. The topics of devotion are few, and being few are universally known; but, few as they are, they can be made no more; they receive no grace from novelty of sentiment, and very little from novelty of expression. (Johnson 1787:267)

However in Indian literary traditions, a hymn is given the highest literary and musical value. The poet-composer (*Vaggeyakara*) was revered as saint. Thus the trinity of Carnatic music Thyagaraja, Muthuswami Dikshitar and Syama Sastri are referred to as saints. In the beginning the Telugu church made use of the translations of German, Latin, and English hymns in its worship. These hymns were sung in their original western tunes. Translated hymn introduced the concept of choir hitherto non existent in south Indian musical tradition and shaped a distinct music style associated with protestant Telugu Christians. Apart from the translations the native congregations began to use hymns and songs written by the converts. As mentioned earlier the converts brought into church music their own music cultures and gradually a parallel music tradition along side the western music emerged and over a period dislodged the primacy of the translated hymn... *Keertana* form served the function of the western hymn in native worship.

The *keertana* form in Tamil context is seen by some ethnomusicologists as a caste marker privileging the brahamin over other music cultures (because Carnatic music has always been an exclusive brahmin domain), however in the Telugu protestant churches which are predominantly dalit this does not seem to be the case (Sherinian 2007). It would also be wrong to say that the *keertana* tradition was a part of the 'indigenization' of Christianity as some studies do. Such a view would make the new faith an imposition rather than an expression of complexly negotiated interiority (Hepziba Israel 2014).

The first Telugu Hymnal was published by William Dawson in 1857 (Murdoch 1870) containing hymns by Pulipaka Jagannadham, Purushottama Choudhari and Dawson himself. This was the most important event in the evolution of Protestant Telugu literature. Soon the Hymnal became a cultural marker, accorded a very high place only next to the Bible in all Protestant denominations. The Telugu Hymnal continues to be truly ecumenical, transcending denominational boundaries.

Purushottama Choudhari was one of the first Christian *vaggeyakaras*, for he not only wrote hymns but also set them to music and performed them. Thyagaraja, who was an older contemporary exerted a great influence on Purushottama Choudhari as is evident in the hymn *'kanna thandrivanukontini gati neeve Rama'* (I thought you were my father O Rama, my only refuge) his only surviving hymn before conversion. One can also notice the influence of older *vaggeyakaras* Annamayya and Ramadasa. Choudhari used the *keertana* form to propogate the gospel especially in the tradition of *nagara sankeertanas*. His *keertanas* since they were basically expressions of personal spirituality were lyrical as well as evangelical.

A significant feature of Choudhari's *keertanas* is that while expressing an intensely personal experience they also expounded Christian theology using images, symbols from Telugu religious and literary traditions. Each *keertana* was occassioned by a significant personal experience in the life of the poet. Scholars have demonstrated how Purushottama Choudhari's *keertanas*, influenced by the poet's Vaishnava background and Bhakti traditions, contributed to Indian Christian theology especially Christology (Sundar Rao, Joseph). He composed hymns covering the whole Christian calendar from annunciation to ascension, and also liturgy that included exhortation, praise, confession, absolution, benediction, and eschatology. It would not be an overstatement to say that no other native Christian poet could demonstrate such a wide range.

Besides *keertanas* he produced works in many Telugu literary genres such as *sataka, prabandha* and *kavya*. Puroshottama Choudhari is perhaps the earliest Christian poet to write in *sataka* genre. *Sataka* is a verse form that is usually made up of hundred (*sata* in Sanskrit means 'hundred') poems that may or may not be interrelated. Each poem is autonomous and complete in meaning. Two of his *satakas, Yesu Nayaka Satakamu* and *Kreestunayaka Satakamu* are highly valued among Telugu *satakas* by some critics (Gopalakrisna Rao)

His most outstanding work is *Rakshana Charitra* which is a poetic retelling of the story of Man's fall, redemption through Christ, and the second coming. Though its theology is Christian, it is articulated in the language of native literary and religious traditions. It is a highly imaginative work and is far superior to Joshua's *Kristu Charitra*. Joshua's poem lacks genuine poetic feeling, and gives the impression that it is more a product of mechanical cerebral exercise than an expression of genuine feeling.

Purushottama Choudhari and the Question of Caste

Caste in postcolonial studies is seen as a colonial invention consequently missionaries engagement with caste is viewed as a part of the colonial strategy. Since the postcolonial position is influenced by diasporic 'upper caste' academics the relationship between colonialism and missionary interventions in the sphere of caste is seen within the framework of 'civilizing mission' not taking into account the perspective of the victims of caste oppression into account. As a corrective it is necessary that caste, to use the Saidian argument, must be seen from the 'standpoint of its victims' (Said 1979)

Nicholas Dirks eponymous work on caste and colonialism is illustrative of the pitfalls of post-colonialist framework in interrogating caste in the context of colonialism. He argues that the missionaries who produced a great deal of knowledge of caste saw it as an integral part of Hinduism rather than a social practice and were responsible for introducing a split between the religious and the secular which was later picked up by the colonial administration (Dirks 2001). Dirks asserts (for he never succeeds in demonstrating his thesis) that caste was: 'refigured as a religious system, organizing society in a context where politics and religion had never before been distinct domains of social action. The religious confinement of caste enabled colonial procedures of rule through the characterization of India as essentially about spiritual harmony and liberation' (1993: xxvii).

Dirks's contention that the missionaries in fact were instrumental in viewing caste as a religious rather than a social institution is derived from his selective reading of the *Minute of Madras Missionary Conference on Caste* (1850:305). A closer look at the *Minute* reveals that the concern of the missionaries was the prevalence of caste among the converts, its divisive nature within the native church and its debilitating effect on the spiritual growth of the nascent native congregations. According to Dirks, the missionaries post 1857 revolt exploited the idea that the revolt was sparked by caste practices and impressed on the colonial administration to initiate measures against such practices. In Dirks view the knowledge produced by the missionaries resulted in the reification of caste and was used by the colonial administration to indirectly control the natives. Much of the postcolonialist scholarship on caste hinges upon this thesis (Copely 2000; Pennington 2005; Mani 1998)

The early protestant missionaries who arrived in South India in 1706 at Tranquebar were confronted with the enigmatic entity called caste (Roberts 1847). They were faced with the challenge of first understanding it in terms of the religious and social traditions of the natives and then formulating a doctrinal position in the light of the gospel teachings. Beginning with Ziegenbalg the missionaries produced literature that attempted to describe, understand, critique caste. The missionaries at Tranquebar (Tarangambadi) much to their consternation found that the converts did not renounce caste after their conversion but continued to practice it within the church also. Initially the missionaries tolerated caste among the new converts out of an erroneous assumption that it corresponded to the idea of social rank in European societies. Like their Roman Catholic counterparts they saw caste as a social practice, something external and not part of "heathenism". Despite their adherence to the church doctrine regarding the equality and oneness of men it could not succeed in removing the practice of caste in the native congregations. The native converts from "upper castes" did not give up their caste privileges and continued to practice caste rituals and markers. In the earliest protestant congregations the converts continued to follow caste practices not only in their social life but in the church as well. The 'untouchables' and 'lower castes' were segregated during the service and the 'lower caste' clergy could not administer communion to the 'upper castes'. Separate cups were used to administer communion to different castes. Inter-dining and inter-marrying were not allowed. Attempts by some missionaries to stem this practice were met with resistance from the 'upper caste' converts. G.U. Pope's *Letter to the Tranquebar Missionaries* (1853) documents the problems of caste in the native church.

By the early 19th century the protestant missions become more vocal and firm in denunciation of caste. Bishops Wilson, Heber, Corrie and Spencer declared in their 1847 (Roberts 1847) document that caste practice was incompatible with Gospel teachings. *The Enquiries Made by the Bishop of Madras Regarding the Removal of Caste Prejudices and Practices in the Native Church of South India* (1868) provides insights into the missionary attempts to put an end to caste practice. The *Minutes* of the Madras Missionary Conference on caste 1850 put an end to the dilemmas and articulated the position of mainline protestant denominations, i.e, incompatibility of Christian faith with caste practices (*Missionary Herald*, 1850).

Unlike their counterparts in the Tamil country the LMS, SPG and Baptist missionaries in the Telugu country were firm in their opposition to caste practice from the beginning i.e early 18th century. It is important to note that the Telugu Brahmin converts renounced their caste completely unlike some famous converts from other regions like Ramabai, Nehemiah Goreh, Narayan Vaman Tilak, Brahma Bandhab Upadhyay who could never make a complete break with their Brahmin past. Native critiques of Hindu religious systems produced by some of these converts skirted around the question of caste. In this context Purushottama Choudhari's critique of caste *Kulachara Pareeksha* (An Examination of Caste) which appeared in 1833 has the distinction of being the earliest native denunciation of caste that was to find an echo many years later in the writings of Mahatma Phule. However it remains an obscure text, almost unknown among scholars of caste, colonialsm and Indian Christianity. It can be contrasted with the works of Choudhari's older contemporary Vedanayagam Sastri, the famous Tamil Christian poet whose *Saditerattoo (*Explaining Caste) and *Jatitirttutalin Payittiyam* (Foolishness of Amending Caste) put up a defense of caste while decrying missionary interventions in the native cultures (Dayanandan 1998).

Drawing upon native writings like those of the popular 17th century poet Vemana, the bhakti poets and Hindu sacred texts Choudhari exposes the falsity of the practice of caste[3]. Unlike other native Christian polemics this work is more an expose of the strategies the Brahmin priesthood invented to keep others in a state of subjection. The tract begins with the creation narrative in Genesis where the only difference ordained by God is that of sex. Choudhari considers the *purushasukta* origins of caste as an invention of the Brahmins to justify their claims to superiority. How can the progeny of Brahma who is without caste, he asks, be divided into castes. Further he questions the existence of thousands of *jatis* where as textually only four varnas are recognized. Using the analogy of a tree and its fruit he argues that just as a tree cannot bear different fruits one being cannot give rise to different unequal beings. Choudhari presents various illustrations from texts like the *Bhagavatha*, *Upanishads* and *Puranas* to undermine the brahmanical ideas of pure origins and superiority by birth. He makes copious use of the verses of Vemana to demonstate the hollowness of rituals, notions of the high and the low, and caste practices. Choudhari demystifies the sacred origins of caste and goes on to take on the apologists of caste who try to explain untouchablity in terms of "polluting" practices like carcass removal and beef eating. He argues that if one's caste were to be determined by the nature work (karma) than many "chandalas" perform works designated as "noble" and hence must be considered superior to the Brahmin. He further argues that many consume products of cow—such as urine, milk, butter, do they then, he asks, become untouchables?

Choudhari, thus, sees caste as an invention of the Brahmin priests and denies it any theological base. Towards the end of the tract he takes up the evangelical theme appealing to the readers to repent for their sins and turn to Christ for salvation. He describes Christ as the 'true light' that dispels the 'darkness of caste'. Humanity, he says, consists of only two castes: one consisting of people who turn away from sin, are saved and called children of God and the second named 'Satan's caste' consisting of those who do not give up the sin of caste pride and are "cast into hell fire". A striking feature of this tract is that it is free from acrimony or indictment of Hinduism but is persuasive drawing on traditions which perform what Partha Chatterjee called an "immanent critique" of caste. By treating caste synonymous with sin Choudhari makes the tract perform the twin functions of reform as well as evangelism. It can be said that Purushottama Choudhari's voice is the earliest instance of colonial modernity in Telugu culture.

The life and career of Purushottama Choudhari reveals the dynamics of colonial encounter and the complex ways in which Christianity negotiated with native traditions in a colonial context. It is illustrative of the native negotiations with colonialism and brings to the fore the creative response of a language and tradition to an altogether different belief system.

Notes:

1. Very little is known about the work of Rev William Dawson. The LMS records and reports and contemporary missionary magazines contain only some information about his ordination and missionary work. Some of Dawson's papers are with the School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS) archives but nothing containing his literary work in Telugu.
2. A.V. Timpany for instance contested Hay's translation from a doctrinal perspective. What role Purushottama Choudhari played in the controversies is not known.
3. There is no consensus concerning the period in which Vemana lived. C.P. Brown places him in the 17th century.

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The Illogic of Fantasy and Nonsense: The Indian Context*

Sumanyu Satpathy

> ...children's literature did not properly exist until the imagination had been given an entirely free rein to entertain children in unreservedly fantastical books like Lewis Carroll's *Alice in the Wonderland* (1865) and Edward Lear's *Nonsense Songs and Stories and Nonsense Botany and Alphabets* (1870)
>
> Matthew Orville Grenby

Theorists of nonsense usually assert and highlight the difference between minor generic categories such as jokes, riddles, fables and fantasy etc on the one hand and nonsense on the other. In my paper I examine the interrelationship rather than differences between these genres, especially, and in keeping with the theme of this seminar,* between fantasy and nonsense. Though I shall look at the practice of nonsense writing across literary cultures, I shall focus mostly on Indian styles of nonsense to show how it is not so much in terms of *difference* among, as through the peculiar reworking of, traditional genres such as the fantastic that traditional Indian nonsense thrived until Indian *literary* nonsense's advent through Sukumar Ray.

I

In common parlance, both fantasy and nonsense are used as antonym to what is real or empirically self-evident. Often statements or claims that are hard to believe, or taken as not-true or not-real, are dismissed as either fantastical or nonsense. Talking animals, magic mirrors, flying human beings and such other obvious elements that belong to the world of fantasy or the fantastic are also used liberally to construct the world of nonsense. Apart from this lack of referentiality, that is, this disjunction between signifier and signified—both being largely non-mimetic forms—the element that is common to both seems to be that the sequence of events in both forms of the narrative defies logic. The classic case of *Alice in Wonderland* or *Through the Looking Glass* by Lewis Carroll might clarify the point I am trying to make here. The first one, *Alice* begins perfectly legitimately like any other fantasy. Much that happens in the narrative in quick succession holds the attention of the reader more because of the illogic of the events than their verisimilitude: the waist-coat clad rabbit that talks, and the hole into which Alice slides and so on. But soon, and with Alice, it moves into what is recognisably different from the genre of fantasy. Indeed, it continues in regular fantasy manner until the reader encounters a sentence like the following one quite late in Chapter I:

> "But do cats eat bats, I wonder?" And here Alice began to get rather sleepy, and went on saying to herself, in a dreamy sort of way, "Do cats eat bats? Do cats eat bats?" and sometimes "Do bats eat cats?" for, you see, as she couldn't answer either question, it didn't much matter which way she put it. She felt that she was dozing off, and had just begun to dream that she was walking hand in hand with Dinah, and was saying to her, very earnestly, etc.

Sharing the character's puzzlement, the reader begins to question the facticity of what is being described. One is reminded of TzvetanTodorov's formulation that, in fantasy, "the hesitation of the reader between a natural and supernatural explanation of the events described...this hesitation may also be experienced by a character" (Todorov 33). But in the passage above, Alice's narrative poses a situation where the hesitation of the reader is more than that of the character. This happens when Alice grows so tall that her feet appear to be unreachable. It is not only the breach within the body, but a rupture within the domain of language: a breach between the syntactic and semantic:

> And she went on planning to herself how she would manage it. 'They must go by the carrier,' she thought; and how funny it'll seem, sending presents to one's own feet! And how odd the directions will look!
>
> *Alice's Right Foot, Esq.*
> *Hearthrug,*
> *Near the Fender,*
> *(with Alice's love).*
> Oh dear, what nonsense I'm talking!

This last sentence is almost a giveaway: Carroll hinting at the departure he is making from the usual genre of fantasy; nonsense takes over—the whole idea of a part of the body being a "place", and postal address to which the person sends a parcel is more nonsense than "fantasy". Thus, though both nonsense and fantasy interrogate our relationship with reality by offering a way of reaching out to impossibility, nonsense often refuses even to indicate what that impossibility is. Pictorial representation of the impossible can still help our imagination apprehend it in the world of fantasy; but in the world of nonsense the impossible can be vague at best, and, even better, incomprehensible.

Take, for example, the less known short pieces by Edward Lear, "The Story of The Four Little Children Who Went Round the World" or even "The History Of The Seven Families of the Lake Pippli-Popple". The first one of these begins in the usual manner of a fantasy:

> Once upon a time, a long while ago, there were four little people whose names were Violet, Slingsby, Guy and Lionel.... and they all thought they should like to see the world. So they bought a large boat to sail quite round the world by sea, and then they were to come back on the other side by land. The boat was painted blue with green spots, and the sail was yellow with red stripes: and, when they set off, they only took a small Cat to steer and look after the boat, besides an elderly Quangle-Wangle, who had to cook the dinner and make the tea; for which purposes they took a large kettle.

But from now on the illustrations in the form of simple line drawings take over the task of complementary signification, and contribute to the clue about nonsense, especially through differential treatment to the realistic human and animal characters and the nonsense character of Quangle-Wangle. Though the impossible and unlikely Cat is employed to steer the boat, and looks to be doing so, the cook, with a strange nonsense name, Quangle-Wangle, is hardly recognisable as any real being, with fingers protruding from a no-body. The fact that Lear began his career in the pre-photography era as an illustrator of natural history is revealing in the way he abstained from representing Quangle-Wangle realistically, even fantastically. The illustration of the waist-coat clad rabbit may be fantastic but that of Quangle-Wangle clearly belongs to the realm of nonsense. The strange things that happen to the characters set off beyond the strangeness of Fantasy, what can easily be seen as nonsense. This is best exemplified in a section in Lear's story:

> The next thing that happened to them was in a narrow part of the sea, which was so entirely full of fishes that the boat could go on no farther: so they remained there about six weeks, till they had eaten nearly all the fishes, which were soles, and all ready-cooked, and covered with shrimp-sauce, so that there was no trouble whatever.

Thus, what Rob Kitchin and James Kneale say about science fiction is truer of the world of nonsense. "Simple explanations are deferred and narrative closure is resisted: Nonsense words, invisibility and incoherence begin to acquire centrality."

II

Having discriminated between the two worlds of fantasy and nonsense, I would still maintain that these nonsense narratives would not exist without the broad framework of the fantastic: travelling to strange lands being the most obvious framework. Lercercle says: "There is always something beyond the limit, if only the limit itself. Nonsense both explores and embodies the paradox of Lucretius, for nonsensical words either rebound into grammaticality or else cross into a type of agrammaticality that turns out to be no chaos." I suggest that it is the grammar of existence rather than language that is agrammatical about nonsense. Further, though some theorists like Linda Shires conflate the categories of "fantasy, nonsense, and parody since each question the status of the real in a different, and differently disturbing, way, pushing language and meaning towards dangerous limits of dissolution," nonsense writing often engages with great semantic complexity and uses play (not merely wordplay and parody). It often plays with the limits of common sense refusing to limit the meaning of the text to one interpretation, if at all.

There is something that needs to be said about Carroll's slight nervousness about the experimental nature of his narrative. In *Alice* the narrative self-reflexively and self-consciously departs from conventions of fantasy into nonsense with the reader coming across passages like:

> Alice felt dreadfully puzzled. The Hatter's remark seemed to have no sort of meaning in it, and yet it was certainly English. 'I don't quite understand you,' she said, as politely as she could.

In contrast, Lear carries on confidently, sometimes brazenly so, of being taken in his own terms. This is evident in the following passage from Lear's tale referred to above:

> To which questions a very aged Blue-Bottle-Fly answered, "We found the bottles here all ready to live in; that is to say, our great-great-great-great-great-grandfathers did: so we occupied them at once. And, when the winter comes on, we turn the bottles upside down, and consequently rarely feel the cold at all; and you know very well that this could not be the case with bottles of any other colour than blue."
> "Of course it could not," said Slingsby. "But, if we may take the liberty of inquiring, on what do you chiefly subsist?"
> "Mainly on oyster-patties," said the Blue-Bottle-Fly; "and, when these are scarce, on raspberry vinegar and Russian leather boiled down to a jelly."
> "How delicious!" said Guy.

Resembling in its structure Mad Hatter's dialogue above, this passage also is indicative of the strange world that nonsense creatures inhabit.

III

The connection and/or interrelationship between fantasy and nonsense is as strong in Indian literary tradition as it is in the West; if anything, even stronger. For the tradition of what we call the fantastic is integral to the belief system in India. Here, the fantastic is inextricable from the sacral, whether one speaks of the sacred epics with the ten-headed Ravan or his flying machine or mysticism of medieval India. The many kavyas depicting *les amours* of Krishna simultaneously with multiple *gopi*s who find it hard to believe and yet inhabit the wondrous and magical world....But it is also in the erotic temple sculpture that one notices how the sacred merges with the profane and material, the reality of the body with the fantasy of the sculptors. As Zizek says in a different context, "the structure of the 'real' sex act (the act with a flesh-and-blood partner) is already inherently phantasmatic—the 'real' body of the other serves only as a support for our phantasmatic projections."[Slavoj Zizek in his *The Plague of Fantasies*]. The phantasmatic is also suggestive of the way the quotidian world is apprehended in traditional Indian culture, namely, *maya*. The unseen world of the gods, heaven, hell, fairies and ghosts is as much real (or unreal) as the practical world of earth and sky, the seasons, wilderness, animals, royalty, social and caste hierarchies, priests and cowherds. The oil-man (*teli*), the potter and his pots, and the crow would coexist alongside the sacred thread, the tiger, raja and the Brahmin. It is these signifieds which typify pre- and modern subcontinental realities and invite the description 'Indian'.

In some regional cultures, *tantriks* used *sandhyabhasa* or *sandigdhabhasa*, meaning 'twilight language' and 'doubtful/equivocal language' respectively. This is a language that the practitioners of the twilight knowledge-zone used in order to deliberately keep the system beyond the reach of the common man. The language of mystification is called *ultibhasa* (inverted language) in Hindi. In Kannada, the literary form or style of producing apparent nonsense is called *bedagu* or *mundige*. The following is one example of hermetically sealed *bedagu*:

> Gangadevi became a widow
> Gowridevi took off her ear-rings
> The wind-god carried the bier
> Basudeva set it on fire
> Then on the news spread
> Lord Guheswara is dead.

There is a serious challenge here for the logic-seeking reader. A reader who understands at least the basic plot and names would still wonder: How can the eternal goddesses, the two paramours (Ganga and Gowri) of Lord Guheswar (Shiva), be widowed? How can, for that matter, the great and immortal god Shiva die? Through their inner paradox these lines anticipate the modern tradition of nonsense.

However, it is not only the Indian/Hindu worldview that makes Indian Nonsense "Indian." Rather, it is the deployment of certain verbal strategies that are peculiar to *traditional* Indian nonsense vis-à-vis the *literary* nonsense that can be categorized as part of the vernacular or colonial modern. The traditions outside the high Hindu/brahminical texts can be observed in the 16th century text by *Shikarnama* by Khawaja Banda Nawaz Gesu Daraz:

> We four brothers were only from the countryside. Three were without clothes, and the fourth one was absolutely naked. The brother who was naked had money in his *aasteen*. All four went to the market to buy bows and arrows. Death came, and all four died. But twenty-four came back to life and stood up. Just then four bows came into view. Three of them were broken and were quite useless. The fourth one had neither any end nor a bowstring. The naked brother who had money in his *aasteen* bought the bow with neither any end nor

> a bowstring. Now the thought of the arrow was worrying. Four arrows came into view. Three were broken, the fourth one had neither a point nor a feather. We bought the pointless and featherless arrow, and headed for the jungle looking for prey. Four deer came into view. Three were dead, and the fourth one was lifeless. The lifeless deer was shot with the pointless and featherless arrow. Now, a rope was needed to tie up the victim. Four ropes came into view. Three were in pieces, and the fourth one had neither ends nor the middle parts. The prey was tied up with the rope whose ends and middle parts were missing. Now, a house was needed for rest and also for cooking the meat. Four houses came into view. Three were broken, and the roof and walls of the fourth one were missing. We went into the roofless and wall-less house. There in a *taak* on the wall a big pot came into view. It was impossible to reach out to the high *taak* and take out the pot. A four-yard deep hole was dug into the floor beneath our feet. Only then could the pot be reached. When the meat was cooked and ready, a man came down from the roof, and said, "Give me my share, for this is your duty". His blood brother was also sitting somewhere nearby. He picked up a bone from the cooked meat and struck the man's head. A yellow potato-bearing tree sprang out from the elbow of the man. We climbed up that tree. We saw that melons were being cultivated and were being irrigated/watered with the help of catapults. From the tree, we started picking brinjals and started cooking *kulia*, and distributed it among the masses. We ate so much that we started swelling. We thought that we had grown very fat, so fat that we could not get out through the doors, and we lay there in the dirt. We escaped through the threshold of the house quite easily, and slept at the door of the house and embarked on a journey.

As we can see, it is both fantasy and nonsense, nonsense woven into fantasy, though not called by any generic name/description.

IV

In the later half of the 19th century, Lear was amazed to see that his "Owl and the Pussy Cat" was known to the school children in Roorkee even before he arrived in India in 1872. But it wasn't until Sukumar Ray's work appeared early in the 20^{th} century that modern or literary Indian nonsense got underway. Whereas the influence of the great English masters of nonsense is conspicuous in his works, nothing in it is derivative. Yet, the English tradition would not have been so easily assimilated and accommodated in India had the latter not have its own indigenous traditions of nonsense, examples of which I have discussed above, though no specific term for nonsense was in circulation. How does one identify Indian *literary* nonsense, given the fact that the category is being applied ex post facto to a kind of culture in which the modern sense of nonsense was nonexistent? To begin with, we should recognize that it exists in intersecting matrices: oral/folk and literary; religious and secular. Commonly used terms in Indian-Hindu *tantrashastra* are often meaningless. 'Om hring cling' is one such set of gibberish. Similarly after the Persian influence, expressions like 'gilli, gilli, golla' became common, as we shall see presently. Though these are in themselves meaningless, they may make sense in specific contexts as in the case of magic. For example, when a street magician performs a trick, and uses these terms, they are taken to be essential to the show, as they are addressed to the supposed master of charms, who alone would understand them. When used in secular and workaday contexts, as they frequently are by writers of modern Indian nonsense, the same expressions become genuine nonsense.

Beginning with Rabindranath Tagore, many Indian artists and scholars have invoked various ancient forms whenever they tried to reflect on or even write nonsense. From the Vedas and Upanishads to the work of the medieval poet-saints paradoxes and puns abound and one may notice how they anticipate the genre of nonsense, even though read as philosophy or mysticism. From oral and mnemonic folk songs, riddles, lullabies and game rhymes to folk theatre and modern films, nonsense has been an integral part of the Indian consciousness. Numerous other examples can be culled from traditional/folk *dastans*, fairy tales, and riddles, children's rhymes which verge on the nonsense, and see how they are then adapted to fit into western notion sometimes forms of nonsense. The tradition (on which colonial culture impacted to generate the genre we are speaking of) is the tradition of children's rhyme variously designated across linguistic cultures. In Bengal, Tagore is one of the first to recognize this fact and see a link between the traditional *chhoda* and Indian literary nonsense. In an essay entitled, '*Chhele Bhulano Chhoda*' (1893) he says:

> Ancient *Rigveda* was composed as panegyric to Indra, Chandra and Varuna; but *chhoda* has emerged from the panegyric meant for the twin gods enshrined in the mother's breast—little boys and girls. Neither of these can claim precedence over the other; the *chhoda* may not be historically old, but is so intrinsically. On account of its primitive simplicity it is one of the most ancient of all human compositions.

As we have already seen earlier, Lear noted that his works were known in northern and western Indian towns even before he visited India (1873-75). But it was Bengali literary culture that responded to the foreign brand of nonsense first. After all, Lear had dubbed Calcutta 'hustlefussabad' (Indian Journal, 2 January 1874). Thus mingling of the Indic and the Western can be best seen in the works of the pioneer of literary nonsense in India, Sukumar Ray. In his introductory rhymes to *Abol-tabol* (translated by Sampoorna Chatterji as "Glibberish-Gibberish"), he says:

> Come happy fool whimsical cool
> come dreaming dancing fancy-free,
> Come mad musician glad glusician
> beating your drum with glee.
> Come o come where mad songs are sung
> without any meaning or tune,
> Come to the place where without a trace
> your mind floats off like a loon.
> Come scatterbrain up tidy lane
> wake, shake and rattle 'n' roll,
> Come lawless creatures with willful features
> each unbound and clueless soul.
> Nonsensical ways topsy-turvy gaze
> stay delirious all the time,
> So come you travellers to the world of babblers
> and the beat of impossible rhyme.

Elsewhere in India, a tradition of literary nonsense was slow to develop, as in the case of Odisha. Nanda Kishor Bala worked on the available Odia folk rhymes for children, which, though not quite consciously "nonsense" can now be seen in terms of the modern tradition as outlined above. In his well-known song on the crow, for example, the following lines constitute a clear instance of nonsense: "The high hills are curly-curly/on which is seated the three-seedy." The lines evoke the strangeness of the distant hills and a vague fearsome creature that verges on the fantastic. However, it was not until the 1960s that the tradition was recognisable as nonsense, with the sudden burst of the Odia version of the limerick: that was called "the Five-liner." We shall take a closer look at these below. In Hindi too the tradition was slow to grow in the works of Harindranath Chattopadhya and Sarveswar Dayal Saxena. I have discussed this evolution in greater details elsewhere. More recently, the connection between fantasy and nonsense in the hybrid genre in India can be seen in the following extract from Charu Anands' 'Gilli, Gilli Golla' in Hindi:

But then half a whisker
Suddenly appeared;
It jumped and frisked
And hopped and reared.

It fixed itself
To a golguppa round
So the golguppa with
Half a whisker was found.

It hopped and leapt
And caught a ride
Like a tail, on the raja's
Royal backside.

It fixed itself there
On his bum, on the moon
Just like the string of a blown-up balloon. (My translation)

A similar feature can also be observed in the following piece, "Nanabaya" by J.P. Das

Kakabaya, Kakua, Kakamina
are petrified before the horrible Dhusardhuma.
Chirguni, Pishachuni, Dahani, Kundabhusundi
can really kick up a shindy.
However, the one whose howl scares them all away, I must say,
is Yetiji, I bow to thee, namaste, namaste!

"Nanabaya" usually refers to children's verse in Oriya, like a lullaby. The term can also be seen here in terms of nana (Oriya for different or various) and baya (Oriya for a lunatic), that is, as referring to various types of lunatics. Sometimes, mythical and imaginary entities like Kakabaya, Kakua, Kakamina, Dhusardhuma, Chirguni, Pishachuni, Dahani and Kundabhusundi are invoked to frighten babies to sleep. Another example of how nonsense inhabits the realm of fantasy can again be had from J.P.'s "The Boy from Athgarh"

Fast asleep at eight pm
the boy of eight had a dream.
Eight woodcutters were felling eight trees.
Eight pixies were dancing on the frieze.
The octopus, spreading its eight tentacles
was all set to capture eight barnacles.
Just then eight banshees

with eight ghosts and eight pixies
tried to pull his breeches.
Waking up in a fright, he sees
guarding him were the eight presiding deities.
Now, there is nothing to fear, he felt.
Overcome by sleep, in deep sleep he slept.

Here Athagarh is a place name, literally meaning a place with eight forts and the eight presiding deities is a literal translation of *asthadigapalas*. The world of dreams is synonymous with fantasy, and yet the similarity between the illogic of both the forms here mingle happily, and fantasy gives way to nonsense. The element of fantasy is still part of Oriya nonsense; and the best practitioners of Odia nonsense, J.P. Das, Niranja Behera, Das Benhur, Krushna Charan Behera, Yagna Datta Arya have produced work as successfully as any in India. I append below a few specimens.

Thus, that which we call modern or literary nonsense in India is a hybrid product that arose from colonial contact. Whereas many writers have successfully fused the Indian tradition of the fantastic with the western notion of nonsense, many others have stopped at the level of fantasy, failing to crossbreed the two traditions. To sum up, Todorov's study of the genre of the fantastic leads him to suggest that fantasy "is different from the less accommodating, more disruptive texts that actively interrogate the classic genre/reader interface, the most obvious instances of which are the ghost story (because of its refusal to 'resolve' comprehension) and perhaps the more recent 'magic realism'....for political ends." Perhaps, he should have added, "nonsense" to the list of "the less accommodative" of genres.

Note: All translations, unless otherwise indicated, are by me.

Rabindranath Tagore

Khaapchhaara

The bride's two ears
crab's claws did pierce.
Groom says, "Wiggle them
Real slow, no tears.

Bride sees in the mirror
not in China, not in Japan

among thousands of fishermen's clan
has happened in the ears such horror. (Tr. J.P. Das)

Yawning in the classroom
Matilal Nandi
said: much as I try
lessons don't come handy.
Finally one day he took a tonga,
Tearing off pages flung them in Ganga.
Compounds, injunctions strewn in the stream-
to learn his lessons this was his scheme. (Tr. J.P. Das)

Rama Prasad Mohanty

Fixer

A tinker am I, I'm the very best,
I set right anything loose.
Boys who frolic and prance
and are a nuisance,
I fix their heads, honest,
by tightening the screws. (Tr. J.P. Das)

Bidyutprabha Mohanty

Grind

Grind wheat-out comes flour
Grind mind-you get power
Grind words- there is a fight
Grind your skin-it comes out white
Grind the ears-lessons drop
Grind the lessons-you reach the top. (Tr. J.P. Das)

Krushna Charan Behera

College Boy

College boy Romesh Roy
For exams is never coy.
Degree is easy,
but what is queasy
is 'unemployment'- the killjoy. (Tr. J.P. Das)

Niranjan Behera

Dama Tripathy

Dama Tripathy, my neighbour
never the one to shirk labour–
he ploughs the ground with a needle,
moves the mountain with a fiddle;
makes sherbet out of cole slaw
and sharpens pencils on a bandsaw. (Tr. J.P. Das)

Monkey Grandpa

Rats and flies were playing cricket
Monkey grandpa went there to buy a ticket.
Seeing a huge crowd, the bounder
jumped over them to reach the counter,
but alas, he had no money in his pocket. (Tr. J.P. Das)

Rabbit Punch

Higamushogamusheighho
the rabbit gave a sucker blow.
The mountain tumbled over;
so the elephant took cover.
The jackal ate up the tiger whole
and the horse fell down the rabbit hole. (Tr. J.P. Das)

Kabibar Parida

Hierarchy

The critic is the one placed highest
the fiction writer comes next.
The playwright is there
but the poet nowhere,
the publisher rides the crest. (Tr. J.P. Das)

Yajnadutt Arya

The Youngman of Orissa

Trusting fate's turns
all action he spurns.
Swearing by planetary power
he awaits the auspicious hour.
Pity, he knows not what his worries are
this silly young man from Orissa. (Tr. J.P. Das)

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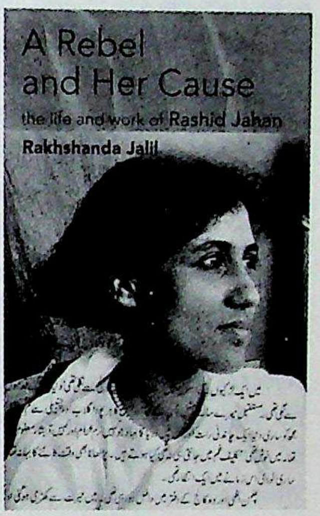
* This paper was presented in a seminar organised by Sahitya Akademi at Goa, 6-9 March 2010.

REVIEW



A Rebel and Her Cause: The Life and Work of Rashid Jahan by Rakhshanda Jalil, Women Unlimited and IGNCA: Delhi, 2014, Pp.xx+248, Rs.395/-

I came to this book with high expectations. Rakhshanda Jalil has recently written in English a comprehensive history of Progressive Writers Movement (PWM) in the context of Urdu literature and culture. As Dr Rashid Jahan was a significant figure of that movement, I expected an incisive, analytical biography within the larger context of the PWM in India. Whether my expectations were met, partially or substantially, will be evident in the following paragraphs.

The book starts directly with Rashid Jahan's family history. Sir Syed Ahmad Khan, the founder of the Aligarh Movement that symbolized an enlightened modernism, had reservations about the education of women. But his disciple and follower, Sheikh Muhammad Abdullah (not to be confused with Farooq Abdullah's father) had abiding interest in and commitment to women's education and it is his dogged perseverance and dedication that resulted in the establishment of Girls' School in Aligarh, and later, Abdullah College which stands today as a living testimony to his momentous efforts. The generation of Muslim girls educated here constituted what Gail Minault so aptly characterized as 'daughters of reform', many of whom contributed to the radicalization of the Muslim Woman's consciousness. The heroic struggle that Sheikh Abdullah and his wife waged for decades to make the dream of women's education a reality has not yet been chronicled adequately in English, apart from snatches that can be glimpsed from occasional articles, reminiscences or Gail Minault's work. The first value of Jalil's book is that it fulfils this gap in some measure.

The 'condition-of-women novel' began to be written in Urdu right from its birth in 1870s in the hands of Nazir Ahmad (1830-1912). Although his narratives had a moral purpose, it is in them that women for the first time began to be portrayed somewhat realistically and not as stylized figures of dastaan. Nazir Ahmad's work was continued and amplified through the works of his nephew, Rashidul Khairi (1868-1936), Urdu's first most popular and prolific fiction writer, who gave centrality to women characters and their role in society. His publication house, Asmat Book Depot, published hundreds of books for women and women-centred journals such as *Khatun* (1904) and *Ismat* (1908) that were hugely popular. However, it would take more than a half century or a little more for women writers to emerge, find their own voice and craft their own narratives. Rashid Jahan grew up in a home where women's education was an article of faith. "At home, her father, Papa Miyan would read her stories from Shakespeare, while her mother introduced her to the world of women's journal such as *Khatun, Ismat* and *Tehzeeb-e-Niswan*." (p.15) Her education, experience and temperament led her to an empowering vision of women which she tried to actualize through her works. However, the society at large was not yet ready to open up to reforms and female education was resisted most virulently. Women were, by and large, relegated to domestic chores and child bearing. Deprived of any agency they lived the life that was fashioned for them by those who dictated the patriarchal structure. Rashid Jahan's social efforts and literary endeavous were directed towards restoring this agency if we look at it largely as a negotiation with structures, sometimes subterranean and subversive, but often visible and frontal. A significant part of her work, like that of her junior contemporary, Ismat Chughtai who was fascinated by her and unabashedly accepted her as a model, mounted a blistering critique of orthodoxies of all kinds—Hindu, Muslim, Christian—and establish their credentials not only as proto feminists but as true champions of secular modernity as well.

The book is divided into two parts. Part I consists of 4 chapters that deal with her biography and an assessment of her literary works. Part 2 contains English translation of her select short stories and plays. Both the parts cohere in the sense that once the reader is familiar with Rashid Jahan's upbringing, medical training and her commitment to the communist ideology, her literary works begin to make greater sense.

Jalil devotes a whole chapter on the discussion of *Angarey*, the slim volume that created great furore among the Urdu reading public. The strength of Jalil's book is that she makes use of both Urdu and Hindi sources to arrive at a balanced perspective. Quite a bit of material is now available on *Angarey*, including the work of Khalid Alvi's in Urdu (*Angarey*, Educational Publishing House, 2005) and the two English translations of the text that appeared almost simultaneously in 2014. Jalil has largely drawn upon the material already available to look at the volume historically and also in terms of its impact on later writers. *Angarey* was the training ground for Rashid Jahan's budding talent. Later, her association as an active member of Progressive Writers Movement (PWM) and Indian People's Theatre Association (IPTA) helped her hone her art as a writer. However, it has to be remembered that she was not so much interested in the formal aspects of writing as in the message contained therein. She used literature as an instrument of change and reform in society. Her stories and plays were like whiplashes designed to wake up a society that was steeped in conservatism and false beliefs. Some of the issues she dealt with in a language that was uninhibited, stark and totally devoid of shibboleths seem radical even from today's vantage point. A few extracts from her work will make it evident:

> A man thinks that as long as he has given a woman food and clothing he has done enough. The more conscientious husband would think he is being fair if he spends one night with one wife and the other with the second. As though wives are mere toys for their husband, he can play with either one he fancies. And who is to blame? What if the two women were to unite? What would the man do then?
> (*Aurat*, p.230)

> *Woman*: Can I ask what sort of a map you have in mind of our life after marriage? In the morning when you are setting out for work, your wife should get you ready – all dressed up like a doll! Then after you have gone, she should stay home – turning the beads of rosary, taking your name and do the housework. This life of forced imprisonment is called 'looking after the house.' And, then, when you return home, tired and irritable, your wife should please you...
> (*Man and Woman*, p.163)

> By the grace of God, Kubra Begum produced a child every year or so and by the age of twenty-five was the proud mother of five sons. Her luck was the talk of the entire family... after all, one wouldn't wish a daughter even on one's enemy.
> (*A Daughter-in-law for Asif Jahan*, p.124)

Now, a few words about the English translation of Jahan's works. As an experienced translator, I would have expected Jalil to say something about the process of translation. Some of the pieces were available earlier in English. For example, the play, *Aurat* was translated into English by Steven M Poulos in as early as 1981 and was published in the first issue of *Annual of Urdu Studies* (University of Wisconsin, Madison, USA) When a translator re-translates, one expects her to engage with the already available translation in some way and point out inadequacies or gaps that the new translation seeks to address. Further, translation is not merely a linguistic activity but a cultural one, and the translator should make utmost efforts to make the cultural transfer as smooth, lucid, and intelligible as possible. Let me take an example from Jalil's translation of the play, *Aurat:*

> Atiq: ….First of all those men are na-mehram for you and you must observe parda from them….
> Fatima: …he is your friend and admirer, so he is mehram for me. You call him to our house all the time, he drops in on his own, too. And he is not na-mehram. And Aziz and Qadeer, with whom I have exactly the same blood relation, they are na-mehram! Tell me how?"
>
> (*Woman*, p.218)

Now, how many of those who read the play in English will understand what 'mehram' and 'na-mehram' mean. Indeed, how many of young readers who read the play in Urdu will understand the concepts? It is in such places that the translator has to assume the role of cultural interpreter. The concept could have been explained in a footnote or cleverly inserted in the body of the text to remove the opacity and make the translation more accessible and reader-friendly.

I have a bone to pick with the publisher as well. Faulty type-setting mars the beauty of the text at many places of the book. "Apabi" reads as "A pabi", "Ala Bi" as "A la Bi" "Ale Ahmad" as "A le Ahmad", "Astakhfurullah!" as "A stakhfurullah", "Acutely" as "A cutely" "Gail" as "G ail", "amidst" as "a midst", and so on right through the book. In this day and age when technology of printing is so advanced, such lapses cannot be excused and must be removed in the next edition. One expects a better standard from Women Unlimited.

Of course, these comments are in the nature of suggestions which may be useful if the publisher intends to bring out a somewhat larger edition in the near future encompassing Rashid Jahan's entire oeuvre. She is a writer who is now being mined by scholars in radical literature and gender studies, and a fuller edition will greatly serve the cause of scholarship.

M. Asaduddin

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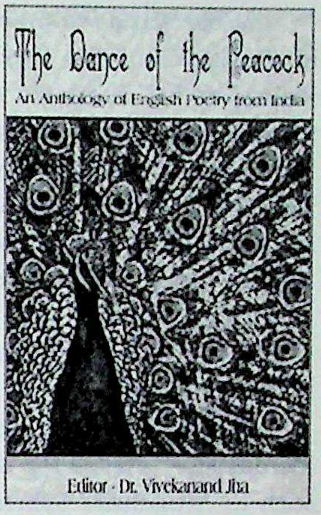

The Dance of the Peacock
An Anthology of English Poetry from India
Editor · Dr. Vivekanand Jha

The Dance of the Peacock: An Anthology of English Poetry from India Edited by Vivekananda Jha, Hidden Brook Press: 2013, Pp.518+xvii, $26.95.

In the poem 'Wind', by Vivek Narayanan, included in the anthology under review, the poet declares:

> If there are others in this page with us,
> they are marked by a tapering mound of thatch,
> or the yellow shrapnel of a shrine.
>
> Wind is the hint of what could happen. (p.483)

This poem becomes a metaphor for this collection of poems titled 'The Dance of the Peacock' (henceforth called TDOTP); for, the 'others' who 'are in these pages with us' are a multitude. This creates peculiar problems for a reviewer. How do you write the review of an edited volume of poetry that contains the work 151 poets? How do you even grapple with 496 pages of poetry, and try and produce a reasonably fair review within a relatively generous word-limit set by your editor?

This review is, in some senses, as much a review as an answer to these questions.

There is a continuing crisis in publishing poetry in English in India. Commercial publishers in India, almost as a rule, no longer publish volumes of poetry; almost no one has a poetry list any longer. There are some occasional exceptions. But this not a trend that is limited to English. Apart from a few languages (whose number one can perhaps count on the top of the fingers of one hand), in most Indian languages such as Odia, according to anecdotal evidence, there are practically no new volumes of poetry that are not self-published. This is perhaps largely true of poetry in English in India as well

There are, mostly, only two avenues for publishing English poems in India now: one is set of webzines that have been started (quite a few times, by poets themselves); the second avenue being the increasing number of anthologies being published by both big and small publishers. Mention can perhaps be made here of the one edited by Jeet Thayil (titled '60 Indian Poets', and published by Penguin in the year 2008), and the anthology edited by Sudeep Sen (titled *The HarperCollins Book of English Poetry*, and published by HarperCollins Publishers India in the year 2012).

When faced with the choice of absolutely no poetry being published in English in India, webzines and anthologies are of course to be welcomed for creating a much needed space for poetry in the language in the country. These spaces can also, to an extent, claim to be more 'democratic' compared to the earlier extant practices. Compared to some of the earlier anthologies (for example, the one edited by A.K. Mehrotra), the newer anthologies are more expansive in their scope, and the number of poets whose works they contain: for example, *60 Indian Poets*, as the title suggests a tad unimaginatively, represents the work of sixty Indian poets; Sen's anthology contains the works of more than eighty poets.

But the volume under discussion is perhaps the most expansive and 'democratic', containing the works of 151 poets. Many of these poets, such as Arundhathi Subramaniam, Bibhu Padhi, Jayanta Mahapatra, and, Keki N. Daruwalla are well known. But it's the relatively unknown inclusions that form the few welcome surprises in this collection. Young Delhi poet, Akhil Katyal's work is, of course, known to those of us who trawl the dense clutter of the internet to fish for poems. One of the poems by Katyal included in this anthology has these lines:

> It is one of those old phones where/the numbers aren't buttons but/ winding circles, so that every digit/is a roundabout way of reaching you. (p.13)

—that do what best of the poems do: take an ordinary thing and an everyday event, but explore it in such sophisticated detail that its very ordinariness is made extraordinary. But it can be argued that the two poems by Katyal selected for this anthology are not necessarily his best, or most representative, poems.

But perhaps the question of representativeness arises only when there is an overarching logic that frames it. The volume *60 Indian Poets*, for example with its inclusion of poets such as G.S. Sharat Chandra, and Srinivas Rayaprol tries to rewrite the genealogy of poetry in Indian English. To this reviewer's eyes, the anthology under discussion has no governing framework; the only logic at work seems to be one of 'inclusion'. Poets of all ages and geographical locations seem to find a place in this edited volume, unlike say *The HarperCollins book of English Poetry* that excludes all poets born before 1950.

This rather odd logic of 'inclusion' that seems to frame editorial choices made in TDOTP makes for some pleasant surprises, and interesting reading.

For example, Archna Sahni in a startling way combines the very poco-pomo anxieties of the desi 'exile' with a 'traditional' trope when she writes:

> Not to bring a healing herb
> to a wounded hero,
> but to save myself
>
> I must turn to you,
> my triangular homeland,
> upside down,
> and carry you
> like a hill on my palm
> across the oceans
> and gently put you down
> on prairie land. (p.64)

—and turns the narrative voice to a Hanuman jumping across the 'seven seas' between India and the US, carrying the *des* to the desis in one gargantuan mythopoetic leap.

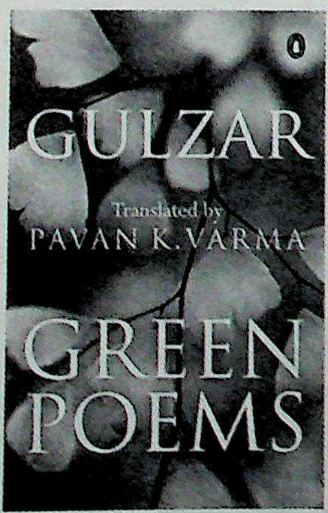
In a similar way, Ami Kaye provides a very astute description of a Mughal garden in a 'miniature painting'—and uses this apparently 'premodern' art-form to interrogate concerns such as that of 'history' and questions surrounding the circularity/linearity of time that are central to postmodern debates. For each competent poem included in this anthology, there is a non-poem neutralising its effects. One wonders why this is so. Is it a result of the 'democratic' commitments of the editor? He declares – 'we have the poems of doctors, engineers, diplomats, bureaucrats, politicians, film makers, management professionals, scientists, bank employees, accountants, journalists and many more who carve out some time in their tight schedule crowded with their occupations for livelihood. With their poems they breathe a sigh of relief from the onslaught of day to day drudgery' (page xvi). Perhaps it is theory of 'poetry as emotional release', and the idea of the task of editing as creating a Noah's ark of poetic entities where one selects 'two of each'. In the order in which the poems are published, one can detect similar 'democratic' proclivities.

But better than not having any poetry being published at all, volumes such as TDOTP give us some good poems. In these times of drought of poetry in print, any such attempt has to be welcomed. But perhaps new approaches to creating anthologies have to be thought about. The anthology edited by poet and editor Manu Dash, titled 'Wings over the Mahanadi: Eight Odia-English Poets', published by Poetrywala this year (2014), with a fitting and stunning cover painting by painter and writer

Ramakanta Samantaroy, provides fresh points of departure by foregrounding the work of eight English poets from Odisha. It's time one interrupted the linear narrative of "Poetry in 'Indian English'" to map out the multitude of collectivities and their poetic oeuvre that such a linear narrative occludes and silences. In this, we are reminded about the true nature of activities of a poetic and editorial nature, and the true democracy of poetry, by a poem contained in this anthology that declares:

> Black tongue of the road,/flicking from the mouth of the car,/Above, circles of crosses – birds of prey,/Poets, we are eaten and eat everything./ (p.455)

Sailen Routray
❑



Green Poems by Gulzar, Tr. by Pavan K. Varma, Penguin Books India, 2014, Rs.250/-

The *Green Poems* by Gulzar is an enormously enriching offer from the master poet to all his readers. Pavan K. Varma has done the English translation of these poems from Hindi or Hindustani, if we may say so. Varma, who is a poet himself, expands the horizon of Gulzar Sahab's readership. The book published by Penguin is remarkable in production especially due to its bilingual design. Any reader who knows Hindi would feel doubly gifted because the original poems are also printed along with the English translation in Devanagari script, giving access to an expression and vocabulary, which is unique to Gulzar Sahab.

The readers who don't read Hindi can relish the English translations of the poems for their content, which is rendered with delicate effort by the translator. The translator has tried to give an effect of smooth flow and rhythm to each poem. Sometimes the problems that translator might have faced become visible when we notice the strain, in some poems, to maintain the economy and the poetic nature of words and phrases of the original Hindustani tongue which contains a lot of Urdu.

The experience of reading these poems give is akin to feeling the freshness of Spring that caught you unawares but suddenly extended a promise of beauty and nourishment towards everything that fell in its lap. Gulzar Sahab integrates all the elements of creation–the earth, water, rivers, sky, space and the sun helping us to derive joy from them and thereby leading us back to what we have forgotten- a connection with the nature.

The poems may be considered as romantic but only to the extent that they invoke DE- familiarization in diction and are mostly nature poems. Otherwise the poet is very aware of the damaged relationship between humans and nature in the present times and effectively reflects the reality of our times in his expression in his own poetic manner.

In the poem, "The Forest," poetic persona is an old Banyan tree who has tended the poet narrator in his childhood. The tree now talks to the grown up adult:

> Now you have begun to walk
> But once you too were like us
> With your roots in the ground
> Straining with all your might to catch the sun...
>
> But once, standing on both legs, you could run
> You did not return.

The poet has very clearly described how the human beings in the past joyfully lived in close affinity with trees and greens and how they now have become harsh and insensitive because of the disconnect with the affectionate touch of the trees.

Another poem "Trees" gently tells us about our own cruelty towards nature:

> When trees pause to think, flowers bloom
> Dipping their fingers in the sunshine
> ...
> They converse with fragrances and call us to them
> (But) Look at our passion:
> The moment anything emerges which is fragrant,
> We chop off its neck!

The *Green Poems* are not just about a poet's love for nature, they are a reflection of a poet's identification with nature at a level which surpasses the Nature poetry that has come down to us in recent times. What is striking in these poems is that they take an imaginary flight into the consciousness of nature. Nature is seen as a complete character with its trees, rivers, earth, sky, rains, rivers, snowfall etc. This whole character of nature reveals in its sorrows and joys which are seen through its connection with human beings. The urgency of this connection is very moving.

In the poem "Autumn-1," the poet becomes a sneaky neighbour to the Autumn:

> With a duster in hand, why is autumn busy mopping up the leaves?
> What has happened to it?
> Crazy, it scurries around
> As though there is something written on the yellow leaves
> Which it must erase!

Poet's love for nature is the kind of love that one is born with. It is not something that unfolds in the awareness when the individual grows up and develops an ego and an identity of his/her own. This love is inherent in the poetic consciousness and the poetic persona is innocently unaware of it while being fully in it.

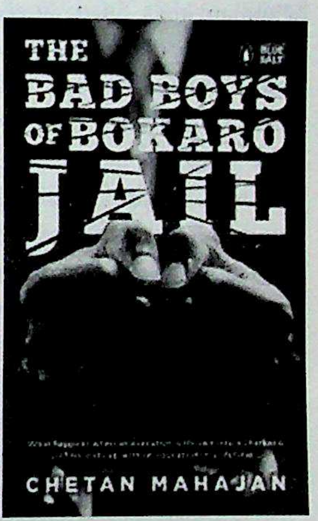
In "The Aged River" sequence, the poet enters into the mind of the River as conceives him as an old man muttering wisdom to himself. It is a moving poem as it reminds us of many rivers that are endangered due to human encroachment. In "Aged River-3":

> Muttering to himself this aged river keeps flowing on.
> His waters within are slowly drying up
> Shrunk in size, he looks emaciated
> Now, the stone, from which he used to earlier leap down,
> Gently suspends him below
> And tells the next stone:
> Hold this old man's hand and help him across!

These poems also serve an important linguistic function. Today urban mind is constantly exposed to an ever-changing language used by an ever-boastful urban dweller. This new urban language is made up of words – splintered and thrown like rotten left-overs in an unattended garbage bin. Gulzar Sahab's poems offer us a gift of a language, which is a reflection of the better side of human existence. They allow us a glimpse into a reality not far-fetched but very accessible and embraceable, if we like. Gulzar Sahab's diction reaches out to those meanings in our lived reality, which is still in conformity with everything else in the existence. In our unconscious we crave for this wholeness again and this book relieves us from our hunger.

Alka Tyagi

The book starts with a SMS that Chetan Mahajan sends to his IAS Officer friend and whose initial part reads, "Hi Vatsala. This is Chetan Mahajan. I am in a spot since yesterday noon. Spent the night at the police station. All explained below. Can you help?" We do not know whether Vatsala replies or not, but that point is moot because Chetan Mahajan goes to jail anyway. In his own words to Vatsala, this is the problem : "I am an employee of Everonn – a listed company. Joined Oct 3rd this year. We run a IIT coaching center in Bokaro. Some faculty here have quit and moved to another company. Because of that parents have asked for a refund which I am unable to give instantly. The police (P.S. Sector 4 Bokaro) is detaining me forcibly and not allowing me to leave. Since I am only an employee not sure if this is legal. Appreciate any help so that police releases me. Thanks. Chetan Mahajan."



The Bad Boys of Bokaro Jail by Chetan Mahajan, Penguin Books India and Blue Salt: 2014

Though the text may suggest that the author is 'just an employee' he is infact the CEO of 'Toppers' an IIT Coaching chain with strong presence in Bokaro and which is owned by the Everonn group. This book is about the days spent by him in Bokaro jail from 24th Dec 2012 till his release on 23rd Jan 2013. Chetan Mahajan gives us a day by day account of what transpired in the jail during his incarceration.

While the detailing is done on a day by day basis, the book can be seen as having three different sections. One part is about the prison, the inmates, the jail system and Chetan Mahajan in this setting. The second part is about Chetan Mahajan's family and how they stand behind him. The third part talks about how Everonn, Chetan Mahajan's employers react to his incarceration.

Chetan Mahajan enters the jail with trepidation, expecting all sorts of bad things to happen to him *àla* a B-grade Hollywood movie: rape, assault etc. He is surprised to find that there is almost no violence in the jail and instead there is a semblance of order and well defined hierarchy within the jail. Depending on the money that a person can spare, anything from cigarettes to cell phone to TV can be obtained. He finds the other inmates to be ordinary people with their own quirks and there is nothing which tells him about the nature of their crime. Mahajan goes on to analyze the prisoners in the jail in the characteristic corporate powerpoint mode. He is friendly with many of them but never really becomes close to anyone.

In the other sections, Mahajan tells us how his father, an ex-army man tries his best to get Mahajan out of jail as soon as possible. He also tells about the love he has for his wife and kids and how the family stands behind him during these grueling days. On the other hand, Mahajan does not have any love lost for his employer. He rants about being let down by the employer and rants a lot about their not doing enough to get him out soon.

Much of what Mahajan says about the prison system may not come as a shock or surprise to the readers. The newspapers provide us with many instances where top political prisoners get all privileges in the jail. That the toilets are horribly managed and they stink also does not come as a shock since we see such cases in many public toilets. The corruption within the jail system is also taken for granted by all of us so much so that when Chetan Mahajan talks about it, it doesn't make us angry. To a certain extent this is an unfortunate comment on our times.

While Chetan Mahajan does provide us with some background about the inmates, he does not dig deep enough to get a greater understanding of the complexities involved in their cases. There is a tone of detachment most of the times and this sometimes leads to a condescending tone akin to what we hear from our brothers who visit us for a short while from USA and tells us how we can do things better in this country. This comes through especially when the author talks about jail culture being a lower middle class small town culture and when he delineates the difference between English and Hindi newspapers.

Another aspect which I found lacking is Chetan Mahajan's own feelings vis-à-vis how society would treat him after his arrest. He doesn't write much about his fears in this respect. It is as if he is completely convinced that there would no change in status with respect to society even after he is arrested. The book would have gained a lot had he given us more details about his own fears instead of the rant against his employers, which doesn't add much value to the overall picture. For a lay reader some questions will remain unanswered: where was the person who recommended Chetan Mahajan to the CEO post when the arrest happened? Why did his wife take so much time before coming to see him in the prison? There may be perfectly legitimate reasons for these but the silence about them leads to questions being asked.

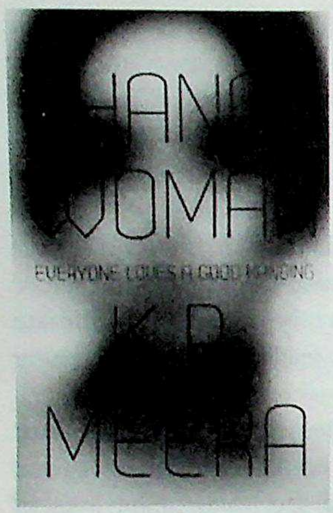
The language of the book is simple and easy to read. The diary format provides the needed structure to the book. The delays caused amplifying the way our judiciary performs and the unfortunate lives of poor under-trials are the main takeaways from the book. Beyond this, the book does not realize the potential either as an in-depth document about those accused nor as a psychological document of a falsely arrested person and hence remains less than a satisfactory read.

S. Suresh

❑

Hangwoman is a novel of formidable proportions. Located in the present-day Kolkata, it moves back and forth in time, and combines incidents in the lives of its principal characters with interesting details from other people's lives and their times, covering a span of about a thousand years, which gives it breadth and depth that is truly amazing.

The novel revolves round a set of complex characters. Prominent among them are Chetna, a young woman of twenty-two, who eventually becomes the hangwoman; her eighty-eight year old father, Phanibushan Mullick, who has hanged 451 criminals as a professional hangman during his long career of several decades; her mother, who runs a tea shop near a busy cremation facility, to provide for the family, because her husband's income from hanging people has become uncertain; her grandmother, who boasts of a long line of ancestors and is a storehouse of stories about families and events of the past; her uncle and aunt, who have a mysterious past, and are now a part of the family; and her brother, whose



Hangwoman by K.R. Meera; Trans. J Devika; Hamish Hamilton, Gurgaon: 2014, Pp.439, Rs.699/-

limbs were chopped by the father of a person who was hanged by Mullick. All of them live in a small, packed tenement, buzzing all the time with activity. In their lives comes a wily outsider, Sanjeev Kumar Mitra, a clever and scheming go-getter with a shady past, who resorts to fair and unfair means, to advance his career in a TV network, because a hanging has been announced.

The prospect of a hanging sets the novel into motion. After a lapse of thirteen years, Chetna's father visualizes an opportunity to demonstrate his skill of hanging people and earning a good sum of money. Since the hanging is preceded by visits of the hangman to police and prison officials and an almost ritualistic preparation, the old man takes his daughter along with him as his assistant, projects her as a hangwoman of the future, a carrier of the centuries old tradition of the family. Seeing in this exercise a possibility of public interest, Mitra swoops on the family home, plies Mullick with booze, panders to his ego, makes a promise of getting Chetna a government job, and even marrying her, to get him to sign a contract for an exclusive coverage of all the happenings preceding the actual hanging. He sticks to his word, and the TV programs related to it catch public attention, but things change for a brief while, because the hanging gets stalled.

When Mitra visits Chetna's home for the first time, he meets the father, earns his confidence and trust, and then moves into her room where he tries to take pictures of her invalid brother. She is so incensed by this that she breaks his camera. He threatens her and whispers in a vengeful voice: "I want to fuck you hard, even if only once." Young and inexperienced, she shows her resentment, but is not sure of how to deal with him. Her feelings towards him alternate between love and revenge. At one moment, she hugs him in her imagination and thinks that they have become "two nestling birds in a tree that swarm in the air," but at another moment she feels that he has given a fatal wound to her soul, almost like what her first employer did to her. Though Mitra helps her to make a mark in the public space through her television interviews and her interaction with important public figures, and takes her out with him after the program to see different parts of the city, she cannot get over her feelings of revenge. She expresses it by what she is good at, by making a noose for him: "I will measure out his rope accurately. Not an inch more. Not an inch less. I too want to have him. At least once."

When the hanging is finally confirmed, Phanibushan is already a murderer, of his brother and his sister-in-law. Although he believes that he can still be the hangman, he is not invited to do the job. So Chetna is called to undertake it. When she goes to the office of the IG police, he looks at her somewhat disparagingly and touches her bust with his ruler. This gives her another wound, transforming the act of hanging into one of revenge: "The urge to kill frothed at my fingertips. I need to kill a man, I decided, stubbornly." She walks back home a resolute being, speaks about the treatment meted out to her by the police on Mitra's TV channel, adding to the tension and excitement of the final event.

To ensure that the hanging passes off smoothly, Chetna is removed to the jail premises ahead of the hanging date. During her stay there, she meets people, and prepares herself for the event quite meticulously. Although a young and inexperienced woman, who is hanging somebody for the first time, she handles the pressure of the situation in a laudable manner; she also delivers on the convict's demands on her attention and time. She performs the hanging with commendable efficiency, for which she earns the gratitude of the convict's brother, gets her due wage, and also a special reward from the chief minister.

Since the novel is about hanging, death dominates the thinking of the living. Because of the location of the Mullick household, the place virtually reeks of funerals and the rites of death. The novel also demonstrates people's keen interest in death. "Our minds are too attuned to relishing the idea of death, of letting it slowly melt inside like [the] sandesh in your mouth." Many people think that an occasional hanging has a salutary effect on their health: "There should be a hanging once in a while to rejuvenate the land and the people."

The novel also shows Meera's deft control over intertwining the past and the present in almost a seamless manner, which is both a source of illumination and pleasure. Chetna's father and grandmother narrate many stories of their ancestors, hangmen of their own times, right from the times of Nanda kings, their colourful lives, their different styles of handling their job, and their artistry. We get a comprehensive picture of the evolution of hanging as a professional activity, with all its finer points, and with also an aura of mystique about it.

When the narrator tells us that, "In this Kolkata of ours, it's impossible to pass a day without remembering someone from the past or stepping on the clods of history," we are also prepared for another kind of intrusion from the past. At every opportune moment, short and long accounts of the lives of saints, seers, criminals, bandits, prostitutes, kings, queens, politicians, Naxalites, and many more are woven into the rich and complex texture of the novel. Embedded into it are also stories, legends, myths, historical events from different eras, which provide depth and complexity to the characters.

Within this complex frame of the novel, Meera dramatizes the changing relationship of Chetna with her domineering father and the overbearing journalist Mitra. We see her move slowly but steadily out of the shadows of their disconcerting gaze, follow her own ways, which climaxes in the act of hanging, and she emerges a triumphant hangwoman, a veritable symbol of female power.

Hangwoman is a remarkably well-written novel that deserves to be read for its narrative ingenuity, deft characterization, and enormous sweep. Reading it is a pleasurable and illuminating experience. Devika, the translator, deserves our thanks for making it available to non-Malayali readers.

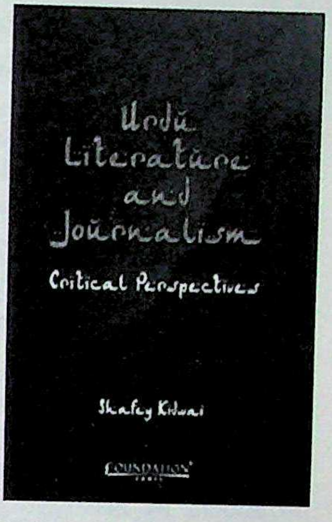
Tej N Dhar

❑

The paradox of ever-growing interest in Urdu literary traditions matched by an ever decreasing population of Urdu knowing readers gives ready currency to works on Urdu literature written in English. An unprecedented boom in the publishing of translations from Urdu into English bears witness to this. There has been a nagging vacuum of easily accessible critical works on Urdu literary culture which may give a common reader an idea of major trends in Urdu literature or its dominant strand of thought. Shafey Kidwai's book does precisely this.

Readers, however, must be warned at the very outset that the book is not an attempt at literary historiography, not is it aimed at producing a sustained perspective on the tradition of Urdu literature from any coherent critical perspective or ideological position. Similarly, it does not attempt to trace any holistic pattern of Urdu journalism. It also does not endeavour to establish and explore links between journalism and literature in Urdu as the title might accost.

An assortment of disparate individual essays, this book successfully communicates to English readers a quick perspective on the specific topics of Urdu literature that the author has chosen to write about, and from the perspective that is his own. The author himself sets the agenda of the book thus: "This book, an assortment of twelve essays, is an attempt to analyze Urdu's inherent prowess of strengthening liberal values, pluralism and ingesting new literary trends, ideological positions and current socio-political discourses."



Urdu Literature and Journalism: Critical Perspectives by Shafey Kidwai, Foundation Books, New Delhi: 2014, Pp.187, Rs.495/-

Instead of dwelling in the already popular zones of Urdu writings, Kidwai chooses to highlight the neglected or not so accentuated discourses of Urdu criticism. Naturally the subjects he chooses, therefore, are refreshingly new and so is his treatment of each one of them, such as chapters on Jayant Parmar or Kidwai's discussion of the influence of Urdu journalism on Freedom Struggle of India or his chapter foregrounding Rabindra Nath Tagore's influence on Urdu literature.

From the perspective of serious literary criticism, every reader, depending on her/his critical insights might have disagreements with the positions taken and the lines adopted by the author. Hence, while reading the very first chapter of the book titled, "Post-Independence Urdu Short Story," instead of nitpicking on omissions and commissions, one should simply relish the fact that starting from the foundational figures of Urdu fiction such as Ratan Nath 'Sarshar', Nazeer Ahmed and Mirza Hadi 'Ruswa,' and taking the reader through Premchand, Manto, Rajinder Singh Bedi, Quratul Ain Haider, Ismat Chughtai, Krishan Chander, Hayatullah Ansari, Jeelani Bano, Balwant Singh, Surendra Prakash, and Hasan Askari the essay leads readers to the contemporary scenario inhabited by the likes of Syed Mohammad Ashraf and Khalid Javed, delineating finer points of art and craft of these writers with a critical eye.

Similarly, when one finds Shafey Kidwai navigating through the ideas and postulations of one of the finest critics of Urdu, Shamsur Rahman Faruqi, one has to fight a natural instinct of raising questions:

That Shamsur Rahman Faruqi himself is a name worth mentioning in the post-Independence Urdu fiction and poetry and has not been taken up as such.

Likewise, the chapter "Post-Partition Urdu Poetry" might appear to be strangely clubbing big names like Amin Ashraf and Irfan Siddiqui with poets who themselves may feel awed by this proximity. Though a fine analysis of these poets and introductory comments about them lends the chapter its merit, a little more detailed treatment of the two stalwarts mentioned above would surely have added value. Also, it would have been good if some English translations of Amir Ashraf's verses were included as well.

The chapter "Jayant Parmar: The First Voice of Dalit Poetry in Urdu" is an excellent tribute to a very fine poet, who, in Urdu, becomes prominent by his mere presence. But it must be said that his value is not only because who he is but for the kind of poetry he has written and continues to write. As it usually happens with such distinctiveness, there is a peril of Dalit identity becoming an albatross around Jayant Parmar's neck. He is, in fact, a very fine poet of Urdu, and like many traditional and modern Urdu poets, he follows the sensibilities of Urdu as much as he tries to create a different idiom of Dalit poetry in Urdu. Nevertheless, Shafey Kidwai needs to be congratulated for highlighting Jayant Parmar and his poetry prominently.

The misty and complex realm of Western criticism and literary theory become so even more when they are adopted, and sometimes "appropriated," in the context of Urdu literature. Being alive to this, Shafey Kidwai in his chapter "Structuralism and Post-structuralism in Urdu Criticism" has successfully charted out the various transitions and evolutions that Urdu criticism has gone through in this respect.

Kidwai again defies anticipations in his chapter on Firaq where he approaches the poet not from the perspective of his poetry but his criticism. The Urdu readership knows well that Firaq had his opinions about the literature of his times and before, of Urdu and of other languages including Hindi, but the readership of English, which Raghupati Sahai Firaq taught at Allahabad University, might enjoy it even more.

The chapter "Ghalib Criticsm: An Overview" lives up to the expectation the title sets up. Beginning with 1809, when at the very tender age of twelve, Ghalib drew critical attention in *Tazkira Umada-e-Muntakhiba*, Kidwai concludes the chapter with the mention of critical works of Shamsur Rahman Faruqi and Naiyar Masood. It provides a rather detailed map of the critical works on Ghalib.

There is a chapter on Faiz Ahmed Faiz's prose writing, which, like the chapter "Firaq as Critic," has an attention grabbing element to it. Predictably, a progressive poet and activist that he was, like his poetry, Faiz's prose too has similar consciousness and concerns. But Shafey Kidwai, by carefully analyzing Faiz's Urdu books *Meezan* and *Mata-e-Lauh-o-Qalam* and his other writings in Urdu and English, as well as writings of others who have worked on Faiz's prose, has collected a fair amount of thought and analysis to place Faiz's prose writings in perspective.

Shafey Kidwai comes to his own subject rather towards the end of the book and it is here that one may notice a sudden quirk of confidence and flair of writing; his coming into his own if you will. In chapters titled "Early Journalistic Endeavors of Sir Syed Ahmed Khan," "Pioneering the First Urdu Book on Journalism," "Contribution of Urdu Journalists to the First War of Independence" and "Abul Kalam Azad's Journalistic Conquests", there isn't just a strong rebuttal of some of the long-held inaccurate views about the history of Urdu journalism, but also a plethora of interesting information and perspectives which could be useful for the students of journalism as well as general readers. For instance, Shafey Kidwai underlines how Chowdhray Reham Ali Hashmi's book *Fann-e-Sahafat* [The Art and Craft of Journalism], written in 1938 but published in 1943, introduced a radical shift in the dominant perception regarding journalism, establishing itself a craft to be learnt and a profession requiring training.

In conclusion, the book offers interesting perspectives and insights. It deserves credit as a valuable ready-reckoner for the English readership, helping them appreciate aspects of Urdu literature and journalism from a refreshingly new and academically informed perspective.

Nishat Zaidi
❑

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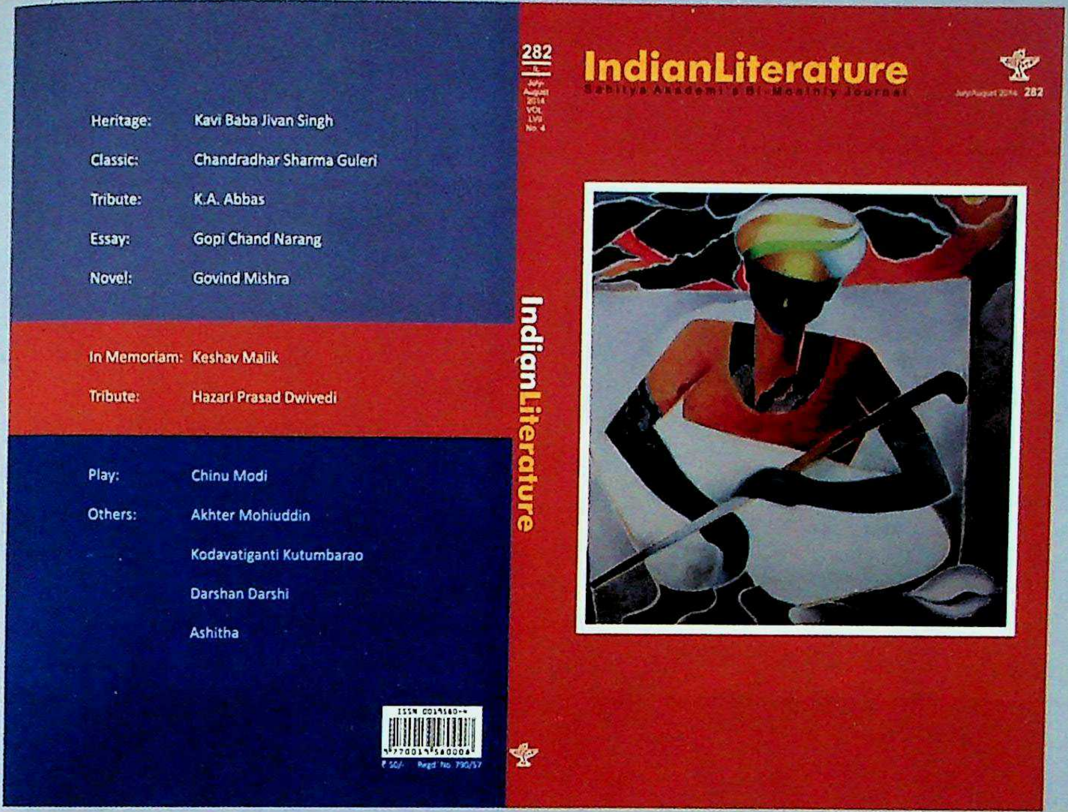

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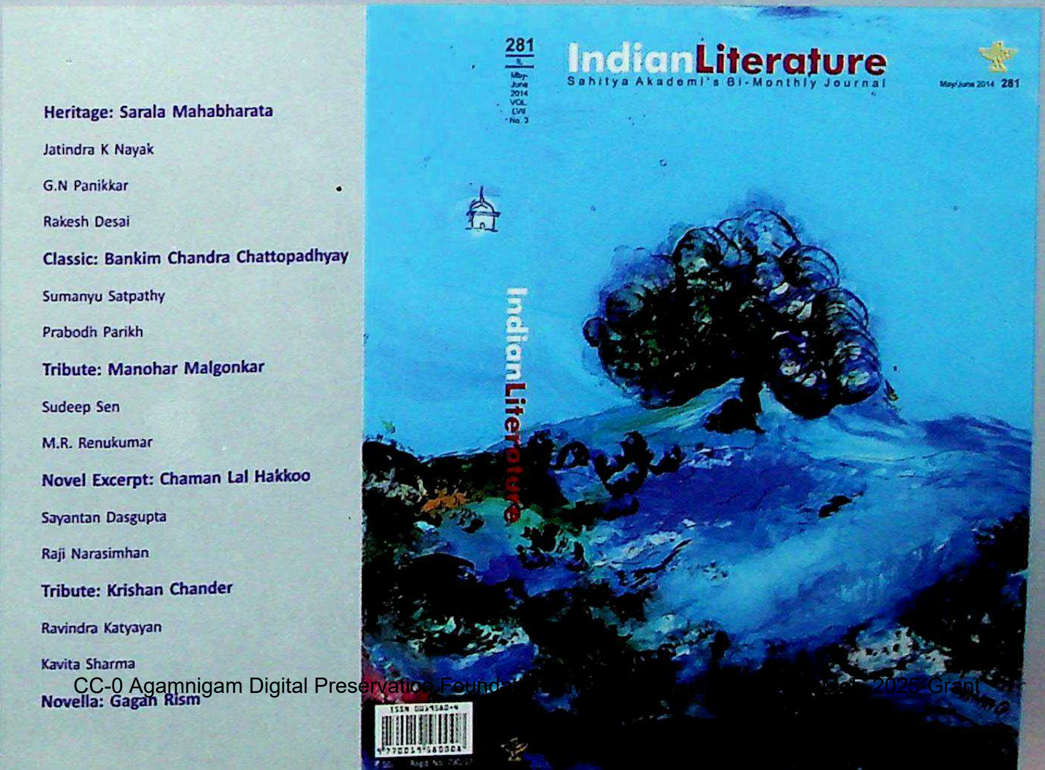

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